



445-00286-095

95c

THE INNOCENT BY MADISON JONES

*A big, sprawling, lusty
novel of the Tennessee
hill country in the
tradition of
William Faulkner and
Erskine Caldwell*

*"Powerful"
—Time*



"UNMATCHED NARRATIVE SKILL . . . EXCITING"

—*Saturday Review*

"A sureness of touch, a fullness of experience,
and somber currents of emotion distinguish this
first novel by an able young southern writer"

—*Chicago Sunday Tribune*

"A distinguished first novel"

—*Library Journal*

"Powerful"

—*Time*

THE INNOCENT

BY MADISON JONES

POPULAR LIBRARY • NEW YORK

All POPULAR LIBRARY books are carefully selected by the POPULAR LIBRARY Editorial Board and represent titles by the world's greatest authors.

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

Copyright © 1957 by Madison Jones

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 57-5300

Published by arrangement with the author

Dedication:

For Shailah

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

All Rights Reserved

PROLOGUE

The road mounted straight ahead of him. It topped the horizon against a brassy noonday sky. In the distance the hillside trembled with haze like steam from fires underground. His steps were silent; each one raised a yellow cascade of dust around his shoes. He did not stop on the long climb. At the crest of the hill the timber began and patches of shade lay on the road. A little farther on the road angled down into a hollow. He saw beneath him shining pools of water; the air cooled his nostrils with a faint suggestion of springtime. He buried his hands in the water, feeling the pleasant shock to his blood, routing the minnows to darting silvery flights around the pool. He drank deep, sucking up the water. He took off his shoes and put his feet in the pool and scrubbed them clean with his fingers. Then he watched the minnows swim back curious to where his feet rested on the shelf-rock and nip at the pale strange flesh.

He contemplated with serenity the whiteness of his skin under the water. He shook the dust out of his socks. This place was not familiar to him but he knew he had been here in the past. From here on in, a few miles more, the road was at least not strange to his feet. He reflected that seven years was a sizable gap out of even the longest life. And mostly wasted. He had brought nothing back. Less than nothing, when he considered . . . less than he had taken with him. He closed his

right eye and stared with the useless eye into his own darkness. But that did not matter much. . . . And he was still a young man. He knocked the dust from his shoes and put them on again. He jumped across the branch.

The road became rougher as it approached the river. It dipped and twisted and angled into hollows and up again, following the trail dug out by the splayed feet of oxen and the little hoofs of mules which had slipped and sprayed loam and chert from under the taut-squatting rumps against the groaning log-wagons. Once it had been sown with gravel all the way to Chapmansville, from where he had walked. Now rarely used, the freezes and rains had melted it into the dirt and washed it away in gulleys which only wagons might cross. There had been an easy way to come—keeping the train to Nashville, and then back north by the main road where he could have gotten a ride to Bradysboro. But he had chosen this way to come, even though he knew that surely he would have to walk all those miles. He had wanted that, to walk by himself for a long time through country where almost nobody lived. There was nothing to hurry for—nobody expecting him; and he had nothing to carry in his hands.

There was another reason too. This stretch of country had kept in his imagination an undying strangeness. As a little boy he had been half afraid of it and dreamed it was a haunted land, a land where nothing, animal or man ever really died; where creatures out of the past lived a silent spirit-life, and showed themselves sometimes on rainy nights as wandering fires along the border of their little kingdom. On one side of the river was Bradysboro; its lights freckled the evening darkness of the river bottom, and hymns from tent meetings rose on the air and echoed across the quiet water. The other side was bluff, rising like a wall of shadow out of a narrow strip of bank and reaching many times higher than the tallest cottonwood. The hymns and sometimes muted shouts reached this wall, then bounded back, as though the Word Itself could not penetrate into the silence of that country. When a little boy, passing on horseback with his father along the high ridge behind the town, he had searched all that he could see of that country for some sign of life. From here on certain misty nights he had seen spots of fire float on the sheer face of the bluff and vanish at the precipice. It was not for years that he could fully believe those were only jack-o'-lanterns coming off the river.

Once or twice when he was older he had come over here

hunting. It had been winter. He remembered clearly his impression that it was somehow much colder here than on the other side of the river. He remembered the peculiar echoes his hounds had raised among the bluffs and hollows and across the rock-strewn flats. He had started at the low barren north end where Little Pone Creek emptied into the river. He worked south, across the flat where piles of rock marked the Indian burying ground, up chert-covered bluffs which made him dig for a foothold, through sparse and twisted and rotting timber that could not tempt even the dollar-eyed lumbermen. Once a catamount screamed like a witch in the broad daylight; tales that wolves still survived over here came vividly back to him. He remembered the sense of warmth and sharp relief that came over him when he had mounted onto the thicket-covered ridge at the south end. Even now this stretch of country touched his body with a chill only different in its intensity.

Ahead the road bent south and approached the river at an angle. He climbed onto the last broad plateau. Here the walking was smooth and straight. On both sides of him heavy thicket shaded the ground. But the road glared pale yellow in his eyes and swam out ahead of him in dizzy waves of heat, so that it looked unsubstantial, like a flowing ribbon of gauze. Only he was moving, walking without sound. The thicket with its unstirring life waited through the drowsing hiatus between the breaths of morning and evening. To the membranes of his nostrils the air brought no smell but a dry tang of pine. Beside the road a fence began. It was all of ten feet high and fine-woven with heavy crisscrossed wire. He remembered this as the game preserve, started some years before he had gone away. It covered a few hundred acres, and extended south to the end of the timber where the farms began. He looked sharp for signs of deer. When the road turned off from the fence he still had seen nothing, heard nothing but once a crow in the distance.

As he walked on, something vaguely troubled his mind; but whether a sound, or only the memory of one, he could not decide. He stopped and looked back to the turn. The road was empty, like a sunburned channel through the timber. Then he saw beyond the bend through the trees something moving, and then the front of a mule, and then two forms upright on the high seat of a wagon. They made the turn and straightened out toward him.

He wondered how he had heard, for the dust muted the sound of the dragging hoofs and the rolling shining wheels; it rose from under them and hung about like the quiet itself con-

densed into a moving yellowish cloud. The mule's head hung down, as though that part of him slept, and even at that distance exposed the keen point of his withers. It was a little mule. Above it the two figures sat, absurdly erect, bodies tight together on the narrow seat, like coachmen on a chariot. One was taller, like a bigger twin. Both wore bright straw hats which threw their faces in shadow. Each one carried his hands in fists upon his lap, as though the tall one too were driving, and held invisible reins. They moved like images drawn along by the little shuffling mule, their heads, their bodies, their hands all frozen into place.

When they got close enough, he saw that they were looking at him. Their look was not curious or hostile or friendly; it was just a look; they might have been watching a stump by the road. He saw then that the tall one was young, and the other old. But dressed as they were alike in overalls and faded blue shirts buttoned under their chins, and gazing with shaded eyes deep-set in faces protuberant with bone and brown as walnut stain, even the difference of all those years between them did not seem very great.

"Going down to Brady?" he said.

The old man was squinting down at him. The young one looked with open eyes into his face. He met the boy's gaze; then he felt surprised. The eyes were not as he had expected; instead they were dingy and unclear, as though the young man had spent too much time looking into the smoke of open fires. There was nothing dull in them. The effect they gave was that of eyes accustomed only to the dark.

"Come closer so I can see ye," the old man said. His voice sounded of rust. Like the boy, his eyes had something of that same strange cast, though mostly their dimness was because he was growing blind with age.

"I don't know ye," the old man said. "But get in. We're agoing to Brady."

"I'm Duncan Welsh." He was going to continue, but the old man silenced him with a nod final and urgent which seemed to declare as useless all that his own scrutiny had not told him.

Seated in the rear of the narrow wagon, he let one foot hang in the vapor of dust, and rested the small of his back against the siding. The wagon moved with the gentlest creaking of wood and harness and the muted thud of the little mule's hoofs. They sat on a plank nailed across the sides. The young

man's shoulders were broad, so broad that the seams where the sleeves of his shirt joined on crossed them shy of the points and drew the cloth up taut from the elbows. But the impression was not so much one of power as of grace rising out of the lean body to a climax in the shoulders and the fine wild set of the head. Gazing at his back, it seemed to Duncan now that he had been mistaken about the eyes, that it was shade from the broad hatbrim which had obscured the quickness bound to reflect out of so perfect a body. The old man too had been like that once, before his shoulders had settled and gone to brawn and the trunk of his body had thickened. Now, with his muscles grown stiff, and the world smaller each year in his weakening eyes, he had to express his pride and his strength in the rigid posture he held. With the boy that posture seemed artificial, an imitation requiring an effort of his will. With the old man it seemed but nature, as though any departure from it would result in discomfort or pain.

It took Duncan a long time thinking to remember who they were—or who they must be, for he had seen them only once. He remembered in pieces from things he had heard, from the conversations of people who did not know the old man, who only knew about him, and had watched him a few times each year come down across the river, like a pioneer, and load his one-horse wagon. His little grandson, with a dead mother and runaway father, would come too, and stand close to him in the silence which the old man always kept. His name was Ezra Pack. Sometimes the men said he was crazy and laughed about him; but other times they looked earnestly at each other with slow-nodding heads, and said he was one man couldn't nobody push. He lived on a few acres claimed by his grandfather, in a log house with a dog-trot through it. For a living, formerly, he had only raised a garden and hunted and dug ginseng. Except the little area around his house, his place was solid with timber which had never felt an ax, and which he had guarded like a jealous priest. The lumberman had smacked their lips at the clear poplar and ash that grew on his land as nowhere else. For their offers and threats, they came away with outrageous refusals; and one who had crossed the invisible boundary with an ax got for his trouble a skin full of shot. He had resisted everything, even the truant officer who had meant, and had the law on his side, to make the boy come down to the school. Finally it was the state government he was resisting, and again with success, for they put the game preserve around him (he still

owning land in the middle) and paid him a salary to be game-keeper. The only compromise he made was by way of agreeing not to shoot the deer himself.

The road turned and started down a steep grade. Through the trees he could see the river below him. When he heard music, he thought his mind was playing tricks; it came faint and shrill and died away and rose again. Then he recognized it; it was a calliope. At an open place in the trees he saw the glint of the Ferris wheel, and other moving shining things in a brown semicircle of tents behind the school. It was the same old carnival, he guessed, that he used to await so anxiously every August. Now the music reached him like an unexpected welcome.

But a bigger surprise waited for him at the foot of the grade. They ran onto a paved road coming from the south along the river bottom, then turning sharp onto a high fill, and mounting in an easy curve onto a silver bridge. Gleaming there in the sun, it looked like an enchanted thing that would pass if he but winked at it. Strangely, it discomforted him. When he closed his eyes the river was as before, broad, potent, treacherous, a barrier to be reckoned with; but all the same a respected and ancient friend whose crossing did not leave the men of Bradysboro fooled about their powers. The little ferry was gone whose engine used to labor and whine in a shrill agony against the force of the thick slow-swirling tide which rose in winter; even the landing was gutted out. But this thing leaped the river; its graceful span hung magically suspended in air by a network of silver threads. It looked brand-new. He was right. As they started under the superstructure he saw a plaque with the date: 1935.

Crossing high above the water behind the unshod mule's sounding hollow-hoofed on the pavement, and the two upright bodies dwarfed under the towering steel, and the rickety wagon vibrant under him with the nerve-shivering grind of the iron tires, he felt an ache of loneliness more numbing than all he had experienced through these last years. So that he was prepared when he found that the weathered frame courthouse had been replaced by a new one, with walls of polished yellow brick, that the square was paved, and that automobiles stood around it thicker than wagons. He saw many heads turn and follow their progress across the square. He nodded to faces he recognized. Then he understood that the people could not see him for the pair erect on the plank seat of the wagon who held the square like actors intent on their roles. Neither turned his

head or changed one jot from the posture he had kept the whole way down.

They had crossed the square and were heading onto the road that led past the school. Duncan stood up in the wagon. "I'll get off here. I'm obliged to you." Still without turning his head, the old man nodded in that emphatic way, and then the boy with only less decision. Duncan paused. Getting no other reply he stepped to the ground.

He stood and watched them. He wondered what those two could want out of all the noise and cheap thrills and titillations a carnival had to offer. Others must have been wondering too. He saw a number of men disengage themselves from groups that stood about the square spitting and talking by the hour, and move without apparent aim in the general direction the wagon had taken. Some already had straggled past him. Among them he saw familiar faces, and one or two that he knew well. Now he had begun to hope that all this time had disguised him too well for their memories. He hesitated a moment; then he started down the schoolhouse road. When someone slapped his shoulder he jumped. He was looking almost level at bad teeth that did not suit the ruddy enormous face.

"Well, Duncan Welsh," Mr. Buckner said. "After all these years. I hardly knowed you." And he went on in his professional manner until Duncan decided he was running for councilman again—about the progress old Brady had made these last couple of years, and how much more it was going to make, what with a railroad coming through, and, he had good hopes, a factory. He expanded mightily in a jargon to which Duncan had grown so accustomed that it did not surprise him to find it even in Bradysboro; and he found his mind collecting items like "transform the face of the country" and "threshold of a new era." The voice ran on, impersonal, embarrassingly loud, lighting now and then on Duncan's name, like a roost between flights. It came to rest finally on an intimate note, with the usual personal questions and comments. When Duncan got free of him, one thing out of all that harangue stuck in his mind: it was that his father was never seen at Brady any more, nor ever left his farm at all insofar as anyone knew.

The afternoon was full of the shrill calliope and the sound of motors and barkers' voices in their time-honored style naming delights and wonders to be found inside. In the field outside the ring of tents a row of wagons stood in the sun, their teams hitched to a wire fence. Autos, mostly battered models of the late 'twenties, were scattered about in no order at all.

Nearer to him, apart from the rest, the little mule and wagon stood in shade at the edge of the field. The mule was not hitched; even his bridle was off. But the little fellow was utterly without movement. His head was hung down; his mule ears drooped further than a mule's should; his switch of a tail, carefully shaved at the base, depended from his rump like a frayed and useless rope.

Shorn of the glory his own boyhood had cast upon it, the carnival was a dinky thing. It sat on a few hundred feet of dusty ground shaped like a horseshoe. There were three rides, all more or less mechanically faulty, and little booths which housed simple ball and marble games, each with its own philanthropist. From platforms along the curve of the tents, toad-voiced men bullied and seduced the hesitant boys, prodding with dirty assuming tones at the dark viscera of life. There was a girlie show, revealing the wonders of the female body, and a house of freaks with a real hermaphrodite and aborted monsters in bottles. In a kind of deserted inlet where the tents left a space, Duncan saw the two of them standing. From their attitude he could not tell whether they paid the least attention to that freshet of movement and noise and half-throttled emotion that swirled in the hollow between the canvas walls. Only once while he watched did he see either of them give a sign of noticing anything. Then it was the boy who looked. What had his gaze was a woman on the platform. Her eyelids were dark bruises, and a pale smock, like gauze, drew a silhouette that seemed nude beneath the garment. She smiled coolly down at the sunburned faces staring at her body from the crowd. She stood with her weight on one foot, then on the other, weaving her too-heavy hips.

"Fellows, how'd you like to take that home to Mama?" The barker's voice had a lilt in it now. The boy's face was into the sun; it was not smiling, but it was as bright and clear-brown as bottle glass. Still his body was straight and tense, but tense without stiffness now, as though arrested in some graceful act, and pulsing inwardly with the blood of action. Suddenly he snapped his gaze away. He threw it the briefest instant on the old man's profile. Then his face went blank again, his body stiffened, and he stared ahead into the invisible carnival.

"And she's got more, more, more to show," the barker cried, and he gestured, "—in there where the sun's not too bright for the human eye, and the eye can see all there is to be seen." He looked the woman over again and twitched his body. "O fellows, I tell you—" The crowd was stirring, eying the woman,

grinning into each other's faces. One, a stumpy hatless boy, sang out and silenced the barker's voice with a long "A-a-a-men."

Logan was standing beside him. Duncan was shaking the black hand a long time silently, gazing at Logan, at intervals dropping his eyes from the blood-tinted ones that watched him out of cavernous sockets. He could not get rid of the old man's hand, and after the first greeting he could not think what to say. The hand was hard with callouses, but it rested limp and strengthless in his own, as though its owner were surrendering something.

"I knowed you'd come back," Logan said. "Your daddy say no, but I told him." Duncan watched the Ferris wheel turning in the sun with the shrieking faces of children and a few solemn gray heads. Then he was questioning Logan, until he saw the old Negro was in no mood to answer; it was his philosophy to speak seriously only when the spirit moved him. Now he would only nod and mutter half-coherent answers, and look about him searchingly. After a little his eyes came to rest, but not on Duncan.

"I come to watch," he said suddenly. "I seen them coming, setting proud up on that wagon, and right off I knowed." He made a long pause, and gathered himself up as though by the strength of his forearms crossed on his chest. "There never was no such a man in all this country. No baling wire but what he couldn't break it in his hands; and no man's anvil what he couldn't roll onto his shoulder and come up with it. And swift? Why, swift as them deer he guards over now. No man couldn't stand against him—in a running race, nor wrestling, nor no way. Them carnival people quit trying, for he throwed them all and taken they money. So they say to one another down the river: 'Don't wrestle none at Brady; they's a man there as will whip you sure and walk off with all your money.' And they never brought no other wrestler to Brady till Mr. Ezra Pack done got too old."

He paused again. He was staring at the two of them standing as private and unconcerned as shabby angels waiting upon the hour of wrath. "And now he's done raised up that boy like him as a pea, and come down out of them hills. Like old times . . . living over again."

The old man's voice had stopped. But the speech went on, only silently now, shaping his lips around the words, as though silence only were fitting since what he had to impart would be counted by no one visible as anything more than waste of

breath. Logan turned. Duncan walked with him around the Ferris wheel and a booth beyond to an open place. There a rectangle of canvas the color of dirty water was stretched tight and pegged to the ground between four posts with sagging ropes.

The two of them had seemed to lead a little migration. Now men came straggling in from all directions, singly, and in two's and three's. They drew up around the ring, filling out man by man a solid circle of bodies. Strangely, they brought with them silence like a droning in the ears, through which the riot of motors and voices and music filtered distantly. Their talk was only murmuring, a part of the quiet whereby they shielded sound from the little pool of stillness they encircled. They were not the young, this inner ring of men; Duncan knew them all. They were his father's generation, aging men; or rather men who had aged suddenly, as though since yesterday, and now stood gazing at one another with blank self-conscious faces, pondering it. Some of them, men of dignity and standing in the town, glanced about unfixedly, at nothing, guilty it seemed of a breach in being here at all.

The eyes and the silence focused suddenly. A man with a stumpy broom ducked through the ropes. He swept carelessly, with a kind of swagger; the broom scratched on the canvas, raising clouds of dust, and the man whistled fine between his teeth. Their faces were so intent upon him that they did not seem even to know a crowd was forming behind them with noise and pushing bodies and young voices calling to each other.

"Here he comes," one cried. "Here comes Tiger Sloan."

"Looking hungry," another said.

"Looking like he wants to eat some bone," a child's voice piped.

"I'll lay a dollar on the Tiger." The boy stood almost at Duncan's shoulder. His skinny neck was twisted as he looked behind him at this face and that for a taker. But he found none. Each one shook his head with a grin; they had seen the Tiger already, yesterday and the day before.

"A dollar against fifty cents," the boy cried. But an old man next to Duncan wheeled and glared into the boy's face.

"Hush, boy," he said, "don't bet against your own people." The boy grew quiet, but behind him the others snickered. He scowled, and motioned obscenely with his finger at the seat of the old man's trousers.

The Tiger was in the ring. He stood in a corner, leaning;

he looked out over the heads of the crowd. In his face there was no flicker of motion, even to the squinting of a lid, and his eyes gazed wide open, like a blind man's, into the garish light. The face was not scarred or mashed in any way; yet it seemed disfigured, as though in the making the front of his skull had been hammered loose from its mold. He was neither tall nor short. And under the satin robe that swept over the round humps of his shoulders up to his ears, his body seemed thick and unyielding, like the dead stump of a tree. So that it surprised when in a single swift motion he stripped the robe from his body and flung it through the ropes and sank again into his dreaming. The action came like a gust, as one with the voice that inspired it from a little pink man in a pink shirt who stood inside the ropes. Through the funnel-shaped trumpet at his mouth, his voice lashed out as clear as a hunter's horn. And all the time he spoke his hand kept stroking white the pink flesh of his scalp. Until suddenly the hand sprang out into a pointing finger. The out-whipping of that hand seemed to shock the wrestler to life. He came erect; his chest swelled; muscles stood up like knars under the hide at unexpected places on his back and shoulders. Now he was pacing about the ring. His walk was a kind of disordered hunching movement. But at intervals he wheeled with that quickness which surprised, and squared himself, and looked up, and took the full light of the sun in his open eyes. Like a man closed in by soundless walls, he did not seem even to be conscious of what went on around him, or even to hear the voice of the little man with the trumpet. Except that he did hear, and now and then, raising a hand or flexing a bicep, responded with an instant precision that scarcely followed in time the words from the little man's mouth. Even when in front of him the crowd drew back and left a gap and two men in single file were coming toward him, he did not appear to notice. He wheeled and paced back across the ring.

The two men stopped at the ropes. In the silence which had come even to the lips of the boys behind him, Duncan could hear the old man's low voice, briefly, and then the clear words of the pink-faced man with the trumpet. And then the silence; but a silence tainted now by dim strains of music, which grew louder with his attention until its rhythm caught up his whole brain into the monotonous swinging motion of a metronome counting inside his skull.

The voice through the trumpet cleared his head. The little man stood turning slowly in the middle of the ring, speaking

to all. Outside the ropes, the boy unbuttoned his shirt. He paused as if in doubt between each button. He laid the shirt carefully over his grandfather's arm. He looked at the old man. Again Duncan noticed his eyes. But the old man was not watching him, and did not, even when the boy turned away. He was watching the wrestler whose back was toward him. His eyes were squinted up to see against the glare, but there was more in the distortion of his face than only the strain of seeing; there was something puzzled in it. His gaze stayed there, though the boy had already ducked through the ropes and come upright with the sun making bronze lights on his bare beautiful shoulders.

Now, except for the ring of old men, the voice of the crowd had risen again; the trumpet voice of the little man shouted over the noise. Still the wrestler had not faced around, or even glanced at the man he was to fight. Yet in this fact, in the back-tilted posture of his head, nothing seemed deliberate—only forgetful; he might have stood just so in the nighttime emptiness between the carnival tents. So that he seemed unprepared when the little man stepped through the ropes, and the hush fell upon the ring, and the boy's body grew tense in the momentary vacuum of waiting.

A gong sounded. The wrestler wheeled. His eyes fixed, not on the face of the boy, but low down where the boy's hands were poised at the level of his waist. He came forward a few steps in his slow hunching walk, then angled off, circling. The boy pivoted slowly, his body stiff, bent a little forward; at intervals the muscles of his back rippled in spasms. The solid hush of the crowd was breaking up now. Voices from here and there called out impatiently. Suddenly all were calling at once in a confused and swelling chorus, and the two entangled bodies lurched about the ring, heaving, losing their balance, straining against the sheer force of each other's muscles. Once the boy went to one knee. But he was up again, quick, before the wrestler could take his advantage. Duncan's own muscles were strained to cramping; the body of Logan pressing against him quivered as with an ague passed on to him through that circle of gray taut-faced men. Behind them the crowd grew louder; it shoved them almost against the ropes. With a jerk the wrestler broke free; he took a few steps back.

For a moment like a point of inertia they stood apart, with the boy appearing somehow to grope for his balance, and the wrestler to calculate. But when he moved, edging toward the boy again, his face betrayed nothing. The difference was in

his posture, crouching now, with his humped shoulders weaving. The boy charged. The force of his body sent them both rolling onto the canvas. There was a flurry of legs and arms; the wrestler was on top. Then, strangely, the wrestler jumped up and backed away and waited with that look of unreadiness. The boy got to his feet. But he paused; he had a baffled look.

Then it happened quick. Somehow he was hurtling across the bowed back. His body struck flat against the canvas. Again the wrestler waited. But whether stunned with the blow or only with surprise and shame, the boy hesitated on his knees. His eyes found the old man. They were open wide to the light, and in that instant they flashed an inquiry at once pained and hopeless and profound. The old man stiffened. His hand jerked briefly, struck the rope. Before the boy's head turned his eyes had gone as dark again as though the balls had filled with smoke.

He was on his feet. He inched toward the wrestler with a tired caution. When they met again it was the wrestler's force which drove them against the ropes. They struggled for a moment. It happened as before—his body was prone on the canvas and the wrestler was standing near, waiting to see if his job was finished. But the boy got up weaving onto his feet. He tried to fix his eyes. Then to save himself from falling, he lunged at the wrestler. He seemed to hit nothing at all, only to rise into the air with his feet making a long arc over the wrestler's back. His head hit the canvas first; his body uncoiled beyond it like a great whip cracking against the earth.

He did not move. He lay at the center of a strange hush that had fallen upon the crowd. As close as he was Duncan could see the dark eyes reeling in his head. He ducked through the ropes to the boy's body. The eyes stopped. They seemed to sink back in his head, into deeper shadows, and melt. Now there were men all around, bending over him. A man lifted his head. He laid it down again, gently. The boy's mouth was open, as if he would speak but for his frozen lips and tongue. And all those men around him, with their heads bent down and their still gray faces, seemed to be listening, listening. Until a whisper did come.

"Dory." The old man was bending over him. The wide brim of his hat threw both their faces in a single shadow. He laid one great hand on the boy's heart. It stayed there a long time. His lips kept moving barely in what looked to be an inaudible explanation. After a while his hand closed slowly, as

though of itself, into a knotted fist; then it relaxed again. Someone behind him murmured and touched his shoulder. It took some time for him to notice. When he looked up, his eyes were as dry and pale as burned-out fires.

The old man's movement startled them all. He slid his arms under the body and came up with a heave that flushed the blood into his face. The boy's head flopped back far, too far. Someone tried to hold it up, but the old man wheeled, as though he would use that dead body for a club. They tore the ropes away. He started toward the gate at a staggering walk. Everything had come to a stop; except only himself and the insistent music of the calliope. The music seemed to swell until it filled the whole country around them, to become the element through which he struggled down that corridor of silent watchers, to throb around him and clash impossibly with the rhythm of his steps. The crowd followed him through the gate and out into the lot. Here the music sounded as clear as ever. The old man labored under his burden now. Halfway across the lot he crouched down suddenly, and rested. But still he held the body cradled on his knees. He reached the shade and the wagon on what appeared to be the last of his strength. Yet he laid the boy down in the bed with minutest care. He waked the sleeping mule with the bridle, and climbed upright onto the seat.

Duncan followed with Logan near the group of old men who walked in silence. All the way into town they could hear the music playing "Over the Waves." The square, as mute as daybreak, was watching. Every car was stopped, every face was turned upon the slow-grinding wagon. A few of the people walked out behind to see the body which lay gently quivering with the vibration of the wagon bed. The old man passed through as he had entered. He never looked around, he never relaxed the stiffness of his body. The train of men broke up in the square and mixed into the crowd. But Duncan followed to the edge of town, and then beyond as far as the bridge. He watched the old man mount the long shining arch over the river. When he reached the top of the arch, his upright figure was for a moment directly in the disc of the setting sun. Then he dropped out of sight.

PART 1

CHAPTER ONE

He rode on the wagon by Logan's side. At the top of the ridge above Bradysboro they came suddenly out of the dusk. A golden splinter of sunlight still lay on the horizon. The plateau around them, the hilltops, all the peaks of the earth were flushed with brazen light. It lasted only a minute, until the mules had quit their blowing. A shadow crossed their faces and slid up the bright trunks of the tallest trees toward the still-flaming sky. Now the whole earth was in dusk.

They rode without speaking. Duncan was glad for that, and for the dusk growing around them and the jolting of the wagon. Gradually his mind, his body relaxed. It seemed that only now, for the first time, he could look on these last years as something wholly done with. They were like a gap out of his life. Or as if he had been two persons—the one fixed in a changeless scene; the other drifting, never still but in moments of inertia. Where the two of them met, how one had become the other was still unclear. It had seemed to happen quite suddenly, with his decision of that summer seven years ago to quit school and go north to work. Later, thinking back, it had not seemed sudden at all. His mind could give a kind of sequence to all the trivial pains of years, like the snapping of tiny fila-

ments around his heart. All at once he had found himself loose from something. Not broken loose, just free from moorings fallen off by themselves.

He could not tell when it had really begun. He knew it had been working inside him during those two years in college at Nashville. In recurring fits he had felt confusion and resentment and regret. He did not know who to blame. Sometimes it was the professors with their smug analyses and remedies for ills he did not even know existed. Sometimes it was his father, shut off in his valley, who had seemed at last to grow insensitive to all the distracting rumors of change that reached him from beyond the range of hills. His father had ceased to comment upon them, even with his eyes. And Duncan had ceased to speak of these things, for his father had treated his comments like intrusions into something personal and private. He had received with what looked like indifference Duncan's decision, in his twentieth year, to go off to college. Duncan had gone with a sense of relief which his stay in Nashville had done nothing to diminish. It was there, after two years, that he had made his real—he had thought his final—decision. He went north, to Chicago, with his sense of freedom renewed.

At first he had been happy. He had not yet worn out the excitement of all this novelty, of being alone and dependent on no one but himself. He had worked on a newspaper. It was one of several papers he was to work for during the next years. But that pleasant period seemed brief now that he thought back on it. His disenchantment must have been growing secretly even then. As much as anything else it was the fault of the work, which had brought him by degrees to a perception of all the cant and half-truths and fraudulent ideals that prevailed in the life around him. A perception too of the outrageous absence of proper order, of purity, of that which was either one thing or another. More and more that life had come to seem to him a state of endless flux, a process of aimless and perpetual dissolution. It came to suggest to him an interminable war waged against itself, between countless varying opinions, between companies, between classes, between individuals. The one ideal shared by it all was that of sworn enmity to whatever was established, to whatever

the past had held untouchable, worthy of love and transmission. It saved its particular venom for these. So that he came to wonder at last how anything could hope to survive in its elemental purity, still free of the dirt and distortion left by every barbarous hand which had an itch to handle it. There, to escape attack, a thing had better be no older than the daily newspapers to which he had contributed so much sensational and irrelevant gossip.

All this he had come at last to think. It had dawned upon him only by degrees. It had begotten his always increasing awareness of the enmity between himself and the life around him, and the sense of isolation which had become finally so harsh a trial. He might have come to inhabit the one fixed point in a heaving sea against which he must be always on his guard lest it pull him in with the rest. Looking back he could see that these last years had been a kind of tired and watchful defense of his integrity. A defense that had become instinctive, breeding in him a sensitiveness which enforced his isolation. He could still reflect with some surprise upon the fewness, the casualness of the friendships which seven whole years had brought him. Even the two friends who had really shared his sympathies had moved on after a year or so. Not until afterward had he been able to see that it was nothing more than loneliness which had led him into his greatest single blunder—his marriage. More than all the rest this failure had caused him, not by nature solitary, to assume an indifference that finally had become almost real.

He had moved on to Pittsburgh, and at last to Philadelphia. He still worked on newspapers, mostly. But moving had not helped. The image of his home, of the life he had left, thoughts of his father and his sister had been much in his mind for a long time. Now they came to him with increasing familiarity. The simplest thing—a smell, the tone of a voice, a leaf falling—was liable to call them up. He began to think seriously about going back. But he did not like to admit failure, even granting that his was not the kind of failure for which people commonly felt shame. Nor was he yet, without intermission, quite certain at the bottom of his mind that going back was the thing that would make him happiest.

It was on his arrival at Philadelphia that the accident

had happened to him. He was walking innocently through the station when a cinder from a passing locomotive flew into his eye. The eye became infected, and he lost the sight in it. Afterward the thing seemed a particularly gratuitous piece of ill luck, the fitting, the malicious expression of the senseless revolving life that went on around him. It had been like another of his beginnings, but blind this time in half of his face, subject to surprises and little fears on one side of his body. Then his sense of isolation had reached a peak. It afflicted him with a kind of inertia that kept him there for some time even after he had made his final decision to go home. Then one day he left abruptly, wondering that he had waited so long.

It was all behind him now, it was finished. Already it seemed a little less than real. They were leaving it, he and Logan, and the dust from the wagon wheels rose up and merged with the twilight and obscured the horizon in back of them. Under a half-moon they seemed to ride in a pale changeless dawn. All things in their eyes were uncertain and near and far ran together in melting lumps of shadow. He watched the moon. He was watching it still when Logan began to speak.

"A dry moon," he said. "Had no rain, seem like, since way last spring. The Lord don't provide like he used to for his people. Wild things won't hardly grow. Plums and pau-paus hard to find. Then, seem like, worms done got in first. Chestnut trees all dying off."

The night air was fresh on Duncan's face. The wagon jostled his body and Logan's voice was soft. So that to him the words meant little; they came and went in his mind, and left behind them only the faintest residue of sadness. But the voice at last caught his whole attention.

"It ain't he's sick. It's just he ain't like he used to be."

"You mean Daddy?" Duncan murmured.

"He don't talk much any more. And he seem like he don't hardly listen to you; like he thinking about something else makes him nervous, and keeps him looking about. He told me how he dreams. All night long. Sometimes it's your mama, and sometimes it's his papa, been dead near on twenty years."

The moon shone in the whites of Logan's eyes. They seemed to be all whites, as though they were reversed and

the pupils looked backward into the darkness of his mind. That was the way with old men. They lived off the past; they lived by dreaming. Now it was his father's turn, and Logan's, just as it had been his grandfather's turn when Duncan was only a child and had sat on the cool board floor and listened by the hour to the old man's hoard of memories.

They turned off the ridge and started down. Below them now was a broad valley, almost circular, bounded on the farther side by a high bluff that rose up perpendicular from the creek bank. Almost under the road they followed, a few dull lights showed from the windows of cabins. It had been a tiny village once, when the mill was there. A few cabins still stood, some in ruins, some occupied by sharecroppers who worked Matt Jordan's land. On the road in front of the cabins someone walked with a lantern. Its wavering patch of light seemed no bigger than a coin. At the foot of the incline they passed the dam. Only a little water spilled over and fell with a muted roar into the pool beneath. They made the sharp turn and approached the row of cabins. A hound greeted them with a voice like a mourner. A fyce came out to pester the mules. Someone stood at the common well, waist-deep in lantern light. It was a girl—or woman. Her skirt was short and her long legs beneath it looked as pale as candles. When they went by in the wagon, the blot of her face turned and followed them. Logan muttered under his breath. The girl was still motionless, watching them, when Duncan glanced back at her. They passed the few cabins where lights were burning and faces watched them from doorways, and left the village behind.

Now they began to talk, with the sudden eagerness of men who had crossed over at last into a place of safety. He thought his own voice seemed shriller, and Logan's the soft, the deep-chested drawl of numberless memories. The gap of years between them seemed to grow smaller, at last to vanish, as though bridged over solid by the mere fact of their talking and forgetting. This ride on the wagon came to seem more and more only another in an unbroken series of rides which, since his childhood, he had taken to Brady with Logan, and had come back after dark. Even the long valley which was his own front pasture, full of dim

moonlight and the black shadows of trees, did not surprise him with its beauty. He tasted the moist breath of the creek and the water-seeping bluff that stood above it. But he took it all in with nothing more than a sense of long-accustomed pleasure. Out ahead through the trees he saw the light from the house.

They forded the creek below the house. Getting out of the wagon, he stood listening as it rattled up the slope and out of earshot. The patch of weeds at his feet sounded with the whispering of tiny secret lives; and water over the shallow ford made a faint noise, like voices muttering confusedly some tedious senseless argument. To these another voice was added, rising out of them, over them, stealing with quiet persistence into his mind. It came from the porch of the house up the little bluff. It swelled at moments into isolated phrases he could not quite catch, but which yet had echoes disturbingly familiar; then it sank again and was lost in the murmuring of the water. It was no voice that he knew. Here in these shadows, this silence of flowing water, it shocked him like some monstrous rudeness.

He saw someone. The figure moved hesitantly down the path off the little bluff and came out onto the road above where Duncan stood. Duncan saw that it was his father. The old man had stopped. He stood in the haze of moonlight and looked around him. His attitude was one of uncertainty; he might have feared some kind of ambush. It struck Duncan that he had never seen his father look uncertain before; he had always been sure and full of purpose. But he was old now. Duncan did not call out. His father crossed the road and walked into the pasture. He stopped again, appeared to search minutely the whole curving fence of trees that stood on the creek bank. He began to walk, still slowly but straight, at an angle away from Duncan. In a moment Duncan stepped out of the shadows and walked after him. From this distance his voice would not startle; he was going to call out. But his father turned, even before he could have heard, and faced him, and Duncan held back the words. As he drew nearer he was sure that his father flinched and stepped back. Duncan halted. "Daddy," he said, "it's me—Duncan." His father did not answer. Duncan spoke to him again.

"Duncan," his father said. His voice was a single note of

perplexity, as though the name were new and strange in his mouth. "I didn't know who it was."

Duncan took his hand. It was as moist as if it had burst out with dew. It trembled a little. But more than that, its strength was gone, leaving the hand shrunken; and the calluses were gone, which once for a second at a time could support a glowing coal without pain upon the fingers. Duncan only managed, "I'm back for good."

"Back for good," his father repeated.

Their talk was halting, almost timid, feeling its way. Although they talked for a long time in the pasture, unable to see each other's faces, they could not come any nearer. Duncan had to keep reminding himself how much time stood between them, how many things they had not shared.

When they came within hearing of the house, Duncan asked his question.

"A preacher," his father said quietly; "a new one named Garner—a Methodist. He was raised somewhere in this section, and went north to get educated." There was none of the old irony in his father's voice; he seemed to dislike going over the thing again. "You'll see what he's like. Margaret Mary will marry him."

"Has she told you so?"

"She'll marry him," his father said.

They climbed the little bluff. The voice from the porch stopped suddenly when he and his father approached. Duncan could see the two of them standing up. He imagined he could sense the alliance between them; they might have been holding hands in the dark. He paused at the steps.

"Margaret Mary," his father called, "it's Duncan come back."

In that moment Duncan did not know what to expect. Standing up tall in the darkness beside a figure taller still, she seemed perfectly immobile. He thought then that this was right for her, this was what he should have expected. He felt the iron he had always sensed in her nature, which never could bend, which never could be disloyal and never could forgive.

But she surprised him. Without a word she came forward to the top of the steps and extended her hand. "I'm glad," she said simply. Her hand gripped his. It had an unexpected warmth. Above him on the porch she looked

taller than in the past, stiffer of body. But her voice was kind; it was kinder than he remembered. She led him up the steps to where the man stood. He greeted Duncan with an impatient tone. Even in the moment of the handshake his fingers seemed restless, as with a need to hurry through such a formality.

Conversation came slowly after the first few exchanges, the obvious questions and answers that left him and his sister conscious of uncertain ground between them. Then Garner broke his own silence. His inquiries were not inspired by politeness; they pressed a little too close, a little too urgently. There was something professional in his manner which seemed to belie his interest in Duncan as a person. He might have been talking to an old acquaintance whose qualities he knew already, whose more recent experiences only were matter for his curiosity. Once Duncan glanced toward his sister's face but it was blotted in the dark.

"Then you've had a good deal of newspaper experience," Garner said.

"Well, yes. But mostly from the bottom."

"Maybe you could help me out," Garner said. "I've been toying with the idea of getting somebody to start a little paper in Brady. We need one badly."

"I think you'd better get somebody else. I had all I wanted."

This gave Garner only a second's pause. "You would be doing a real service. Even if you just helped with it a little. You're a man of education; you've lived in the North, in progressive communities. Brady needs waking up, renewing. This is a new age, with new ideas and new problems. They must be made to see it. Even a small thing like this, properly handled, could be a great stimulant."

"You had better get somebody else to do your stimulating."

The clear hostility of his tone went unnoticed, or else ignored by Garner. He said evenly:

"Think about it a while before you refuse." And then, "I'm a minister, of course. But these things concern me directly too. Religion should not be something set apart, it should go hand in hand with all the things that make for a better life. Everything is a part of religion . . . en-

lightened thinking, fellowship, social justice . . . all those things. You'll be surprised, though, as I was, to see how much progress Brady has made in the last few years. Not that there isn't still a long, long way to go. It's always a hard job to overcome traditional notions and prejudices."

His words fell into a silence so stiff that it seemed bound to squelch him. Or did Margaret Mary's head nod faintly in agreement? At any rate he was not squelched. His voice, in fact, seemed to have gained an energy that hinted increasingly at belligerence.

"That's why I came back here . . . because I thought I could be of help. Little communities like this, as well as big ones, have got to grow up. This is a new age we're moving into . . . a better one. And religion is the key. It's got to be raised above the kind of static primitive thinking that makes it a form of tyranny over men's minds."

In anger Duncan opened his mouth to speak. Garner's voice scotched his tongue; it rose with the heat of an answer to some vexing objection. "God is not a rigid dispenser of laws that never change. He came to glorify men, to plant his divine gifts in every man's heart. People must come to see that his laws are love and mercy and brotherhood. That's what Christ meant. We're beginning to understand it only now, after centuries of legalism and intolerance and bloodshed." He paused for a second. Then, "But Mr. Welsh doesn't agree with us."

There was such a sting of irony in the words that Duncan felt his face blench. He looked at his father, then at Margaret Mary. Neither one of them seemed to have stirred; they might have been cowering under the threat of just such another rebuke. Duncan felt his throat constricted with anger. But he had let pass already the moment for an answer. The hush rang yet with echoes of that voice, its peculiar intonation that suggested vocal cords of brass. Then, far down the creek, he heard a mockingbird singing. Its song was like a distant flute. It seemed to draw nearer as he listened, as though it would come at last to perch on the roof above them. His anger seemed to grow tired all at once.

"That's why I came back," Garner said. There was the least hint of faltering assurance in his voice. "To do what I can. The day of 'Thou shalt not's' in religion is

over. Such ideas can do nothing but strangle the human spirit." He appeared to hesitate upon another thought.

Then he stood up with a suddenness that punctuated the hush, the distant song of the bird. He was only a matter of seconds taking his leave, with a quick impatience of voice and hand that ignored the coldness he met in Duncan and Mr. Welsh. He lingered briefly with Margaret Mary on the steps. The explosions of his car engine echoed in the valley. They listened as the car sputtered down the slope and forded the creek. No one spoke. The sound of the motor receded; the silence washed in upon them. Margaret Mary went back to the swing. His father moved slightly in his chair. She did not look away from some point out in the yard where she seemed to have fixed her eyes.

"I'll answer your question," she said. Her voice was uncompromising. "Yes, I'm going to marry him."

There was not a stir in response. She was still for many moments, daring them to answer. Then, in the same tone, "I am thirty-four years old. Since I was a girl the nights I've spent away from this house I could count on the fingers of one hand. Do you think it's all been pleasant? Do you know how many times I've wished for anything at all to *happen*? Anything to stir up this dead air. I want to know I'm still alive. Wouldn't *you* be sick of it?" She was challenging him, looking at him now. Her manner angered him; he looked out into the moonlight.

"It's your business," he said quietly. He knew he was laying himself bare, but he had to say it. "But why a man like that?" Without even trying to see, he knew what her face looked like. He was sorry. Waiting, he could sense the very pitch of the voice swelling in her throat.

"A man like that! You have never known a man like that." Each word was distinct, measured, as though she were throwing darts at him. "Do you know what it means to be dedicated to an idea you feel has got to prevail? What if it does deprive him of graces sometimes. Which is the most important?"

Duncan looked straight at her. But he spoke as quietly as he could. "I've already seen his *idea*, it's everywhere. And I've heard that speech before—before he memorized it. I hoped I wouldn't find it here . . . but I see he's filled

you full." He knew he had gone too far, he heard her choke.

"You—." She seemed to run out of breath. "Where have you been languishing all these years? You've been loyal, haven't you?" She was almost panting. Even through his anger and through the shadows between them the flash of her rage was like a blade drawn suddenly. He wanted to retreat. But she was on him again. "Now you've come crawling back—because you had no guts. What's your idea? What will you do now? Rot?"

"Stop it!" The old man was standing up. One hand was raised, as though he was shielding himself. Suddenly Duncan felt like a participant in some orgy upon which a door is opened. What looked on was outraged innocence. He felt the ugliness of it, his face went hotter still with shame. He wanted to say something, some kind, salving thing. But before he could bring himself to speak, his father had turned. His figure, slumped a little forward, moved away from them down the porch and vanished into the doorway. His feet echoed faintly on the bare boards of the hall, and the door of his bedroom closed. If his sister felt it, it did not show in her manner. She turned abruptly. Her feet clattered through the hall and up the stairs; her bedroom door slammed shut.

Duncan started to go in. With a foot on the sill he paused. The house was full of the kind of silence a conch shell makes when held up to the ear. He had never known it to seem so empty. No sound came from the father's room; not even a crack of light showed under the door. He felt that now, with the thing so fresh, with the shame hardly out of his face, he could not intrude. He must wait a while.

As he stood listening into the dark, the stillness seemed to take on a kind of throbbing cadence. Then what his nerves had felt pulsing in the air around him became sound. It was faint, yet distinct, dropping at brief unvaried intervals into the flow of silence. Only then did he remember the clock, how it had seemed to him in childhood to tower against the wall; and the pendulum that never stopped swinging, that carried still within itself the force of that first hand which had set it in motion. So he had thought when he was very small. He had never asked, or wanted to know any different. It had disappointed him when he realized that his father wound it every night af-

ter he had gone to bed. He glanced again at his father's door.

He went to the door of the parlor. The knob was cool under his palm, and when he turned it the latch snapped. The door swung gently back. The parlor was full of the lazy ticking, as though here was the very source of time, and the place where it went by shut away and ignored but all the same counting off the lives of the generations. Moonlight came through the windows and shone dimly upon the ebony straight-backed chairs and the marble top of the table with its painted china vase. Over the mantel his grandfather's portrait was a dark rectangle against the wall. The picture of his mother sat as always on the mahogany desk. Without approaching he envisioned her face, bound in a taut-lipped severity somewhat in excess of what was natural to her. He understood well the kind of integrity that had caused her unawares to exaggerate her expression. It was in this room that her body had lain, and the air embalmed so heavy with the scent of flowers that it had almost made him sick. Even the memory of it had seemed to come to him always through his nostrils in a trifling odor of flowers; and the spring itself with its scent of things blooming had troubled him vaguely at times with its mute suggestion of death. He went to the window and opened it. A night breeze touched his face and ruffled the curtains. He stood a while breathing it. He was tired.

The sofa creaked beneath his weight. The muscles of his body seemed each one to suffer a kind of gentle collapse. His blood slowed down to a pace in time with the ticking in the room. But his mind was busy upon the past. Memories like so many vivid and fragmentary dreams crossed his vision. There were moments out of his childhood, of fishing and hunting and riding his pony. There were people, white and black, in various postures, in speech. Logan with Wesley and Bantam, the latter like hustling dwarfs at their father's side, were crossing the pasture in dusk. Aunt Virgy, so ancient, so eternally alone up there in her cabin, held him in the almost painful scrutiny of her half-blind eyes. And his sister, sternly reprimanding him, aping her mother. But for the most part ineffectually, because of her voice. In this she so far missed her mother's tone of dignity, of tranquil authority, as to

render the performance a little ridiculous, even in the eyes of a child four years younger. Not that he failed to respect her. It was just that his mother's voice was not to be imitated. The vividness with which he could still recall it was remarkable. She used to read to him a great deal, mostly from the Bible. She liked the Old Testament best. There was that in her voice, some almost martial accent, which seemed especially to resound upon the rhythms of Jehovah, saying: "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The woes of Israel, the strength and the agony of Samson; these were things that echoed still in unforgettable syllables down certain channels of his mind. She did not neglect the life of Jesus. But all this was less clear to him now; here his image of her voice blurred uncertainly. He had been nearly a man before it had impressed him that the Beatitudes promised blessings for virtue, that they offered to the pure in heart another answer than sheer muscular resistance to the enemies of purity. It was not that she was ungentle, in voice or in act; but only that her gentleness seemed to him now less eloquent than her strength. For he could remember her manner with his father, her tone when she bade him good night, or prayed beside him bolt upright on her knees, scorning the bed against which he was tempted to lean.

But the great impression she had made upon him was one of resistance to every form of weakness. In all but the very coldest weather she had mocked him when on winter mornings he came downstairs to dress by the fire. Nor would she tolerate his crying out when she thrashed him. Not even the time she whipped him so mercilessly with the horse crop, because she had caught him in a deliberate lie. He never doubted her affection toward him. Yet he could not remember her ever displaying it in terms of an embrace. He thought of her always as above such demonstrations. The time he had seen a friend of his embrace and kiss his mother had left him with a sense of childish disgust. Everything beyond the simple act, repeated each night, when she took his head in her hands and touched his forehead just at the hairline with her lips, seemed to him more than legitimate tenderness. He could fathom now what her philosophy had been—to graft upon this

core of strength which she tried to inculcate in him all the virtues which for her were cardinal: honor and self-respect and purity and loyalty.

In all these ways she had instructed him more or less deliberately. But other unpremeditated actions, habits of hers impressed the moral with equal force. She never spared herself. No sort of impediment, of her mind or body, could ever swerve her from her duties, her ideals and beliefs. No argument or bodily ill short of critical were admissible against them. In this he could recognize now a kind of mild fanaticism. Yet even this excess still commanded his admiration, even though he could see that it had sometimes blinded her to sense and reasonable compromise. For it made of her the great certainty in a world whose peculiar stirring he had begun to feel as he grew older. But felt it only when he was away from her. Around herself she always kept a kind of changeless weather which he breathed with a mute assurance that laid all restlessness asleep. The tick of time in the house was not more unalterable than she.

But the alteration came. The ritual of the house was broken. One morning she did not come out of her room, or ever again but a few times, invalid-fashion. Only then did he realize the extremity of the pain she had carried silently with her around the house during the last months of her activity. Then he recalled her pallor and the increasing feebleness of her movements. After this it was not very long, by the calendar. Except for the quiet and his restlessness, he could remember vividly only two things out of this period. One was her funeral. The other was an image whose clarity time could never diminish. Through the door of his parents' room his mother's sheets were radiant white under the lamp. She lay on her back. It may have been from the whiteness of the covers, but her face was like a mask of ivory. His father sat on a chair by her bed, his head down. His hair, his garments seemed touched with the kind of aura which snow gives off at night. In this whiteness their hands were joined. Or frozen together, it might have been. For this stillness, sculptured in its perfection, was not rest. Instead it was like the strain of silence which cannot cry out for lack of a tongue. Standing be-

yond the door he sensed this. Later he saw the bloody indentations her nails had left in his father's hands.

A little too self-consciously, and with the enormous difference that Margaret Mary now stood in her mother's place, they resumed the rituals of their life. But they never quite carried it off after that. Something more than his mother's presence was subtracted from their communion. In its place he felt the exertion of their individual wills. A certain increase of ceremony stole into the moments, the brief gatherings which always had been the daily occasions of their life. He noticed too a kind of stiffened deliberation in the casual or habitual acts of his own everyday routine. The temptation to lean against the bed when he said his prayers, or to come down on cold mornings and dress by the fire, he put away with a conscious thrust of his will.

Looking back, he could see deeper into the thing. It was not merely that they had buried with her more of themselves perhaps than she had a right to. There was a difference unrelated to her, from outside. In the unaccustomed silence that followed her death it struck them, as unheard noises fall upon a hush in conversation. Even then it had seemed to him mildly ominous, had disturbed his sense of proper order. Now he realized that it was this outside difference as much as her death which had wrought the change in them all. But most in his father. Duncan could still remember him pacing—who had never paced before—the length of the house and onto the porch and back again. From these months, it seemed, dated the first hint of a perplexity that afterward grew plain in his father's expression. And a habit that in time became pronounced, of gazing at his powerful hands, then abruptly letting them fall, as though in disgust at their feebleness. He might, in his simplicity, have run hard against his first serious doubt of a strength which had been unable to keep even his own wife from dying.

There were other happy times; but they seemed different, a different kind of fun. Partly it was the natural difference which approaching manhood made in him, which made his world seem wider and distances not so great. Partly it was the new stirring, which even the young could

notice, in the life of the community. But even these things did not explain the radical quality of it. For him the core of the difference lay in a certain diminishment of stature his father suffered. In the past he had always seemed one of the powers that be, a kind of local deity whose strength and whose rectitude no one, including himself, was permitted to doubt. Now he seemed by degrees to lose importance, to pale, as though some alien power were overshadowing him. It was apparent in his manner, his expression, the shrinking range of his influence. He participated less and less in the affairs of the county; and when he did participate he seemed to be listened to less and less. Sometimes he would come home from meetings with the angry words still on his lips, about the upstarts who had no respect for the old ways and the dignity of the people. But it was not the old anger, haughty and controlled. It was the kind of anger that comes when a man knows he is helpless. It got so that at these times Duncan would leave his father's presence as soon as he could. He was glad when his father ceased to go at all.

He must have been asleep when the clock struck. Or rather in that state which is both sleep and not-sleep, when the mind floats in a kind of suspension. Through his resistance the heavy-hammered strokes seemed to be driving his spirit into his body again. The voice of his mother was fading, calling each time more faint, "Come to bed, Duncan, come to bed." Until he was wholly awake, sitting upright on the sofa. He went out into the hall, and stopped. For a while he stood gazing at the silence of his father's shut door. Outside under the moon the mockingbird was singing. He turned and quietly climbed the steps to his room.

CHAPTER TWO

He woke up suddenly with the sun streaming into his window. Light blazed in the mirror on his wall and flooded the room. He watched the golden motes swimming in the brightness. He stretched his body. Way off, a rooster crowed.

In his closet he found trousers which in spite of the years fitted him naturally. What clothes he had left behind him when he went seemed to have been disturbed by nothing but moths. Yet his room was without dust, almost ruthlessly clean; even his rifle on the wall was not rusty. It was like her to keep it so, whether or not she thought he would ever come back. But in her it was not fastidiousness; it was a kind of warfare against the forces of disorder which dust represented. Her pleasure did not come of seeing things clean; it came of routing her enemy. When, from the steps, he could hear the swift precision of her movements about the kitchen, he was struck again with the incongruity of the action she proposed. But however strange, it was settled now. He himself had driven in the clincher with what he had said last night. He paused at the foot of the steps. He had not even seen her face yet, except in darkness. He thought that in some striking way it must have altered, so that he would have to get used to it all

over again. The screen door of the porch slapped to. He went into the kitchen.

The big range gave off an aura of heat. On a red oil-cloth that covered the little table by the window a side of bacon lay. He could see her through the window, at the well. She pumped like a man, with the strength of her arm alone; only the hem of her faded skirt swayed with the motion. When he saw her turn to come in with the water, he hurried to the table and took the knife and began to slice the meat. She was looking at him when she came in the door. She set the bucket down.

"I've sliced the meat all these years without any help," she said.

He laid down the knife. He could see her face clearly as she went about setting the big table. He was wrong; it had not changed at all. It was not the kind of face that did change much after twenty-five, with its features almost too regular, and not much flesh in it, and blue eyes which looked almost too pale to go into the sunlight without squinting. Unless, perhaps, it reminded him a little more of the way his mother's face had looked. He started toward the door.

"Thank you, anyway," she said.

He turned to look at her, at her straight back and the tight knot of brown hair low down behind her head. He spoke softly:

"I'm sorry for what I said last night." Her arms quit moving. "It was none of my business."

She turned deliberately and looked at him. Her eyes appeared as they had a hundred other times in the past when she had been like a mother to him. "We can't always help what happens," she said. He was looking again at her rigid back.

When Duncan entered the parlor he did not at first notice his father. He started, so quiet the old man sat. Settled back in the cushion of the sofa his body looked shrunken. Duncan had never seen him on the sofa before. Always he had sat on one of the straight-backed chairs, as though in contempt of the sofa which set the body down low and forced a crook into the back of the sitter. His hair was all white now. Among the outcropping of brow and chin and

cheekbones his face appeared thin to emaciation. He might have just come through a hungry winter. Yet it looked blunt somehow, until one noticed his eyes. They peered out of their sockets with a peculiar pale intensity. But most of all Duncan noticed that he looked untidy. There was a long white stubble on his face, and the corners of his mouth showed brown traces of snuff. Even his shirt needed changing. Nothing of the intensity in his eyes carried into his voice. Their talk was halting, desultory. The business of last night seemed now too distant for apology. When the bell rang from the kitchen they had already lapsed into silence.

Margaret Mary stood at the stove. She did not speak when they came in. His father sat down immediately at the table. Duncan hesitated behind his chair and watched Margaret Mary spooning oatmeal vigorously into a bowl. She set the bowl on the table in front of where he stood. Through the steam that rose up between them she looked at him. Then he wondered if a little while before he had experienced the last gentle moment there would ever be between them.

"Sit down," she said. "We don't stand up and wait any more."

The old man looked up, not squarely at her, just toward her, as though even the sting of that rebuke could not make him so far forget all caution. He looked confused; he leaned forward as if to rise, and put his hands on the table. Then he paused, avoiding Duncan's eyes. Finally he settled back, and stared into his plate. And all the time Margaret Mary stood and looked down at him with pale eyes resembling his own. But her eyes held no comment, they seemed to be only watching, speculating with such concentration that she did not notice Duncan's hardening gaze upon her. From the porch came the lazy cluck of chickens and the sharp tapping of their beaks on the floor. Duncan jerked his chair from under the table and sat down abruptly. Then she looked. She turned away and began bringing food. After that no one spoke except in monosyllables. Whenever he glanced at her, sitting at the other end of the table from his father and him, she was looking at her food and eating with scrupulous nicety. Once

a rooster crowed from the porch, sudden, and startlingly loud. Still hungry, Duncan excused himself and got up out of the silence.

Outside, the morning still had its early freshness. On the ridge a flock of crows skirmished in brittle staccato argument among the treetops. Sheep were grazing beside the road which climbed the rise to the crest of the pasture. They had cut the grass down to a stubble. Some of them raised their heads and watched him pass. At the top of the rise he stopped. The crows sounded more distant now, behind the range of hills to the east. But the valley was quiet. Even the roosters had hushed. The sheep, at a distance down the slope, grazed without sound. Almost without motion, by inches, they pushed before them across the pasture the solid blot of shadow which the hill cast. Behind them the early sunlight gave a kind of transient brilliance to the pastures and the long arc of the creek bottom below and the sheer face of the bluff that circled half of the valley. But all of it looked empty. Somehow it reminded him of a deserted battleground. He cupped his hands and called, not too loud at first; then once with all his might. His voice seemed to wake up the valley. It answered him faintly from the bluff, and again, fainter still, from some indefinite place. The sheep had raised their heads, they stood at mute attention. There came another voice, stronger, giving way to the same distant echoes. It was Logan, somewhere down near the hog pen. But he saw no one. Even Logan's cabin, perched on the slope above the spring, looked uninhabited.

The barn sounded with the cooing of pigeons. The night air lingered inside. He found the mare in a dark stall eating hay. She snapped irritably at him when he touched her. He had to pull her out into the light. Her flesh no longer hid the ridges and knars of her skeleton. She hardly resembled the image of her that he had carried in his mind. She had been his father's saddle horse, a colt of the mare he had kept when he and his own father had sold off the horses years ago. That was in 1906, when Duncan was only a few months old. And yet, absurdly, he seemed able to remember the time when the barn was full of horses, and colts galloped around the lot. But especially he seemed able to remember a huge chestnut stallion with one glass eye

which gave his face a cold satanic look. The stallion's picture was still in the house, he guessed, though probably faded now almost beyond recognition. Near one corner of the picture there was a single pale spot the size of a tear-drop. His grandfather had made it once when he was holding the picture up close to his face, and telling Duncan all over again how the horse had died in the fire, how he had screamed, not like a horse but like something out of hell, through the roar of flames. And the old man had tried until his eyes went blind with the heat to get to the horse. Until the screaming stopped, and then became part of a dream that had haunted him for months. The horse was only seven then—the prime of life. His muscles would quiver under your hand. In his neck was the strength of a Percheron. Then the old man looked up from the picture, and his face changed. He told how he had spent thirty years breeding that horse, and how the horse was like his old great-grandsire who died so long ago. He was another Mountain Slasher, the only one like him, the only one left at all, as far as anybody knew. And then he too was dead. He left only a few colts, none as good as himself. They had kept only one, a filly who carried his markings. Duncan could clearly remember her. She was a mare then, grazing in the lot with a colt at her side. He could remember her lying with one front leg broken and twisted in the fence, and her sides heaving with every gulp of air, her hide dark with sweat. His father had stood over her a long time with his rifle. His grandfather had turned away and walked slowly, down-headed and muttering, toward the house. They had kept the colt; Duncan's father used her for a saddle horse. But he had bred her only twice, and then to second-rate horses. This had grieved Duncan. Riding his little bay gelding, half the time at a trot to stay at his father's side, he used to admire the long ease of her running walk, the way her head rose and fell and rippled the bright hairs of her mane. When they rode in the slanting sunset light, her mane was like golden water cascading over her neck. But as Duncan grew older his father would hardly listen to him about horses. They were going out, he would say, with always the same kind of sadness in his voice; they weren't much use any more, because of the motorcar.

Now the mare was old. Instead of alive and golden, her mane lay bleached and stringy on her neck. Her temples were sunken, and gray hairs sprinkled the clay-colored hide around her eyes. The eyes themselves looked pale, with a sunburned cast. When he moved his hand in front of her face, he discovered that one of them was blind. He stood for a long time stroking her neck. "We're alike," he murmured, "—that much."

Above him the pigeons kept cooing. From the crib he heard the stealthy rustling of mice in shucks. The mare stamped her foot. He saddled her. She tossed her head about and snapped at the air when he drew up the girth. Mounting, he rode out into the sunlight.

She had not forgotten how to walk. Within a few yards she had found her stride, the long reach, the thrust of her body, and her head falling and rising until the bit popped against her teeth. He turned her down the slope. The sheep scattered in front of them. At intervals they flushed kil-dees which sailed off flashing silver in the sun and uttering frenzied cries. They circled back and topped the rise. Below him he saw Logan at the hog pen. Wesley was there. Still at a distance they stood motionless and watched him fixedly.

"For a little bit," Logan said, "I thought it was your daddy, the way you was setting on that mare. Didn't nobody else ride like him."

Until Duncan spoke to him, Wesley had not so much as smiled, had only seemed to leer. His was one of those faces that looked churlish in repose. But when it grinned, as it was grinning now at Duncan, it seemed to flash all over with an unexpected whiteness. What showed in his face at such times was an uncorrupted and spotless good will. Only that; his twin brother Herman—whom they had called Bantam even after he had long outgrown, in body at least, the signification of the name—had gotten all the intelligence. Herman was gone, they said, had left home years ago.

"Where'd he go to?"

"New York," Wesley said.

Duncan studied a moment. "Are you going too?"

"Naw sir. Else I'd done been gone. I ain't smart enough." He said it without rancor or regret, as a fact beyond questioning. And Logan nodded solemnly.

"There's such a mare," Logan said, "as ought not to been wasted." He touched her shoulder. "Like her old granddaddy, a little bit. Not up to him, but fine as you'll see. I try a long time ago to get your daddy to hunt up one of that old horse's sons. I knowed there was a couple some-place, if nobody hadn't cut them. Wouldn't do it, though. I never tried no more."

"Would she still breed?"

"Not likely. She's a old mare now. Never was easy bred. Ain't even been rode for Lord knows when. I didn't think she'd let nobody ride her but Mr. Edward."

In the bottom, corn nearly ripe already from the drought stood in the windless morning without a whisper of motion. From the level of his eyes above the tops of the stalks, the solid sweep of brown, like a somber forest roof, seemed to flow around them, to split a little way ahead, and steadily close behind. So easy, so steady the mare worked beneath him that at moments he felt he was passing bodilessly over the field, involved in some rhythm of nature. Low over the corn a hawk was hunting, with now and then a movement of its wings.

He rode until the sun was high, up narrow hollows where the dawn air lingered and squirrels chattered at them; up onto the high ridge where lay the ruins of an ancient cabin. The cabin had stood but perilously when he was a boy; he used to play in it with Wesley and Bantam. It was here that he and Bantam had had the fight that neither one of them had ever afterward quite forgotten. He dismounted and sat for a while in the shade of a giant-trunked oak that stood over the rubble.

He started out again in the still heat of afternoon, walking this time, with his rifle. He followed the creek. Sometimes he passed under long stretches of bluff which seeped cold drops of water, where the air had the feel of a cave. Sometimes he would stop and listen. There was not anything to hear, except a bird now and then, faintly, and the noises the creek made at rapid places. But this sound of water bubbling in the stillness had at times almost the quality of a human voice, like words carried from a distance, so that now and again he turned to look behind him. He came out onto a stone bank where the sun reflected white and hot. The water beneath him was as still as a pond, and

blue, like ocean water. He took off his clothes and stood a long time in the sun, until the sweat burst out on his skin. Then he dived into the water. It shocked him at first, then soothed him. He dived deep and opened his eyes in the gloom to look at his hands, like shadows, and rocks that littered the bottom. He liked it in this soundless world, turning and rolling, feeling the water bathe him, hair and feet and body, in its cold purity. On the bank he let the sun bake him dry. Standing there he felt the way he used to feel when he had been very dirty and his mother had washed him clean.

Farther down the creek he turned off into the Sodic Hollow. He climbed one of the steep blufflike hills onto the plateau. Then he walked back to the precipice that overhung the creek, and stood blowing and wiping sweat from his face. It was a dizzy drop to the water below him. The whole farm lay spread out down there, as though at some obscure time it had as a single piece sunk beneath the plane of the long curving plateau and the range of hills that faced it across the valley. It looked as serene, as sun-drenched, as empty of life as a land below the level of the sea.

He passed through a laurel thicket so heavy that at times he had to crawl under the tight-leaved roof. He went out of his way to go through the pine woods where the ground was covered solid with needles and his nostrils burned pleasantly with the resinous tang. He had to circle back to get to Aunt Virgy's cabin.

Sedge grass shoulder-high stood in the open field. Up the long grade near the far edge of the field the cabin stood unshaded. From where he was, it seemed to lean uphill against the descent of the slope, as though to regain a balance it had lost. But Aunt Virgy had stuck to it, though the wind and the thunder made it shiver, because it was hers. She had belonged to his family before the war. And some years afterward, his grandfather had given her and her husband that cabin and the land around it. Her husband had died before Duncan could remember. But she would not leave, even though by herself (she was childless) with nobody to look after the place. She had a number of times let her land to Negroes in the neighborhood who wanted to crop on shares. But mostly she had depended simply on her qualities to extort charity from the Negroes who lived

around her. She was savagely proud. And, especially in later years, a contempt almost sinister in its virulence showed in the manner she used with them. Yet they vied with each other to keep her in food and garments, and, sometimes, even cheap jewelry and bright-colored bottles. Her house was full of such trinkets. When they came to her house with a bundle, as like as not she would refuse to let them in, and they would have to leave it on the front stoop. At such times they would not know whether she was going to acknowledge their presence. If she did, it was only a curt word in a voice still more curt from the darkened room behind the closed door and shutters. But again, she would be sitting in her front door, sewing. For whom, they did not know; she always had on the same clothing, only now and then replaced in part by something they had brought her. But they had an answer: for her crows. She raised crows, tamed them. Even old ones came to her hand, they said. One she had always with her inside the house. She talked to it, and it could answer her. More than one Negro had heard them beyond the door. When she went outside, they said, others came, sometimes in flocks, and flew around her or lit at her feet. And God help the man who had displeased her. She would send them in swarms, sometimes even after dark, it was said, to pluck up his tender corn shoots, and peck great holes in his melons. The wiser Negroes, those who had gone to the city and come back, would laugh at all this, and say she was just a crazy old woman who had a pet crow and plenty of meanness in her. Then the younger ones, and even some who were older, would agree with them and laugh about her among themselves. Yet she continued to live off the fat of the land. Some of those who had laughed most were seen turning into the road that led up to her house with a box or bundle under their arms.

Duncan thought she must be around a hundred now. Yet he had not been in the least surprised to hear that she was still alive. She was to him one of those permanences which one somehow does not expect ever to pass away. All his life, at intervals, he had gone to visit her. Sometimes he would stay all day long and listen to her tales, about witches, and animals, and about old times before and during the war. Her dried-up body, like a mummy almost,

would come alive when she talked. Her bloodshot eyes would go redder still as she looked directly into his face. Often she would give him trinkets. She would let him tease her pet crow, which hated him, and she would laugh as though she loathed the thing that was her only companion. Once it pecked him cruelly on the hand, gripping the skin in its bill, and jerking its head back and forth, as though it would tear his skin from the bone. Then he thought for certain she would kill it. Only at the last moment, with her hand tight gripped on the crow's head, she stopped, suddenly, so suddenly that it surprised him. It was as if an unexpected hand had been laid on her shoulder, and a threat whispered into her ear. She looked up, and turned the bird loose. At other times he amused himself by trying to make the crow speak. Aunt Virgy had told him it could. But though he tried many times, he never had any success. Finally he reckoned that, being old, she had just imagined it.

It was because he had been thinking about the crow that he was startled when, approaching the cabin, he heard its sudden alarm. He was more startled yet when it flew out to meet him and circled his head, cawing angrily. He struck at it with his rifle. It wheeled away and lit on top of the roof and filled the afternoon with its calls. He was wondering if that could be the same one; it looked old, and he knew they lived very long. Then he saw her.

She was sitting back inside the door in semidarkness; she had the shutters closed. She sat motionless, at a slight angle against the back of the chair, like an oversize doll that has been propped up. In her lap was some kind of garment in a little pile. But her hands, paler than the wood, lay as if frozen to the arms of the chair. A needle in one of them glinted like the tiniest shaft of light. But out of that shadow she sat in, most striking was her hair. It was fiercely white, so white that it seemed to cast a pallor over her face, and even down upon her shoulders. She was looking straight at him. He went closer. He saw her eyebrows knit, and her eyes seem to grow wider in their sockets. Suddenly, she leaned forward.

"Mr. Vance?" she whispered.

That had been his grandfather's name. Her house must be full of phantoms, he thought, living up here alone all the time. He stepped up onto the doorsill and looked down at

her. Her eyes, wide open, stared at him. They seemed to go bright and dim by turns, as though the pulsing of her heart kept flooding them with fresh tides of blood. He knew he was terrifying her; yet he held on to that moment. Until he saw her lips move, or writhe, soundlessly. Then he was ashamed.

"Aunt Virgy," he said, "it's Duncan. Don't you know me?"

She could not speak. She reached out with an unsteady hand, and he took it in his own. Her hand was trembling; it felt as weightless and as soft as the least and gentlest bird. He felt a shame still deeper.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I shouldn't have scared you that way."

But he didn't know whether or not she heard him. Her hand lay in his a long time. The crow had ceased its cawing. He heard it flutter down to the ground behind him.

When her hand quit trembling, she took him by a finger, and drew him down at her feet. She leaned forward until her face was almost in his. While she studied him, he could see microscopically every wrinkle in her face; he could feel her breath on his lips. Then, somehow, from a kind of repulsion, he could not stand the thought of her breath going into his lungs. He tried to stifle his own breathing, to take only the quickest, the shallowest breaths at moments when he could not feel hers on his lips. Now her fingers were on his face. Gentle, almost tickling, they moved across his chin, the sharp bridge of his nose, along the heavy brow-ridge above his eyes. Then the fingers moved back again, more firmly this time, as though they were shaping his face. More and more he felt soothed. Her breath seemed to cool his face. Once again he breathed deep.

"That face go on," she said. "The generations die, but it go on."

She had taken her hand away. Her voice was stronger than he had imagined, only rusty. She was looking into his eyes; or rather, as it were, through his eyes at something behind him.

"It don't die," she said. "You's like them."

"I never thought so," he said quietly, "—much."

She fell silent then; she seemed to have forgotten him. He looked around him at the room. It was a little room, but

it seemed littler still because it was cluttered so. Her cot was in one corner. In another was a cabinet which seemed to fill the room, and which, he guessed, had at some time or other come from his own house. It was filled with colorful china, with bright-colored glass and odd-shaped bottles. These seemed in fact to overflow the cabinet, to run out onto shelves that lined the walls and two makeshift tables of painted kegs with boards across the tops. A sheepskin hung on the wall. Near it, strangely, hung a tarnished silver crucifix. And there were many pictures, mostly of people he knew she had never seen. But over the low door in the rear wall which led to the only other room was the crowning glory of it all. It was a picture, almost faded out, in a gold frame which seemed always to have been freshly painted. It was his great-grandfather's picture; a lithograph, he knew now. Under it, suspended on a chain, was a gold watch with the fob hanging open. She kept it wound always, at peril of her life, because she had to get onto a box to wind it. It was there to tell what time it was, she had said; though he had wondered, later, if she could really tell time. He knew now it had probably not been right in years. But as a child he had believed in it infallibly, even when it conflicted with his own big clock at home. It had been as though there were two kinds of time—one for up there, and another for down below.

He got up and sat on a box beside her facing the open door. Outside on the ground, the crow waddled in a kind of rough circle. At times it stopped, and turned its head with a jerk, and cocked it suspiciously. It moved with a kind of ungainly limp; its feathers looked as though moths had been eating them. By raising his eyes a little, Duncan could see his farm below. He had almost forgotten how perfect the view was from here. Only the bottom at the east end was cut off entirely by an intervening hill. Even his house, under two big mushrooming elms, stood out in detail. Unpainted, of heavy time-darkened logs, it somewhat resembled a fort, with its high rectangular shape broken only at one end by a short ell where the kitchen and store-room were.

"I been looking for you to come," she said suddenly. "I been looking for you a long time. It's just you give me a start. I seen you down there."

He looked at her. She went on:

"Up close I can't see nothing much. But when I looks off down there I sees it all plain as light. I seen you going up through that pasture."

He doubted it. He suspected that had she looked the other way she would have seen it just as clearly, out of old habit fixed in her mind. It was just that it had become so real, so well memorized in every detail, that even her blindness could not destroy the vision. She still pictured him down there, as she had perhaps seen him in the past.

"You lost you sight out of that eye," she said, "ain't you?"

"Yes. An infection. Something flew in it."

"It don't matter," she said, "a man don't need but one."

The crow suddenly fluttered up onto the doorsill. He looked at Duncan cautiously, with one little blinking eye and then the other.

"Is that the same old crow?"

She looked at the crow. "Yes sir. He ain't died yet. I be glad when he do." She said the last almost in a whisper.

The crow shuffled hurriedly past on the other side of her chair from Duncan. He turned and watched it flutter up onto her bed and face back toward them and begin preening its scraggly feathers.

"You pappy ain't doing no good," she said, "it don't look like."

Duncan sat for a little, thinking. "It looks like he's just given up. Old men give up sometimes. When they do, it's all over with them."

"He ought to take heart, now you done come back. It be like it used to now, all over again." Her tone was serene and gentle, the kind of tone in which one remembers some old thing.

He saw that the afternoon was waning. The rectangle of sunlight through the door had climbed almost up to her knees. Suddenly the crow made a sound. Duncan started, and looked around at the bird. It sat as before, again preening itself. Partly, it was the suddenness of the sound that had startled him. But more was the fact that the sound was like speech, like a word spoken in some unfamiliar language which suggests one's own but leaves one still uncertain. It resembled the "caw" sound crows make, only con-

trolled and muted, as if spoken by a man with a bad cold in his chest. He watched the crow a moment; then he turned back to the door. But then the crow said it again, and when Duncan looked around it raised its head, as though addressing him, and repeated the word still another time. Duncan remembered now.

"That's his name he's saying, isn't it, Aunt Virgy? Cole? I'd forgotten."

"Get out of here," she said to the crow. It surprised Duncan how angry she looked. The crow cocked its head nervously, and began to shift from one foot to the other.

"Get out of here."

She was coming to her feet, raising herself by the arms of her chair. Her sewing fell to the floor. The crow gave a fluttering leap and landed on the table.

"He doesn't bother me," Duncan said.

It watched her keenly, as it might have watched an insect on the wall. She took a step toward it. The crow flew, cawing, over Duncan's head and out the door. Beneath the table, a red glass bottle lay shattered. Refusing Duncan's help, Aunt Virgy bent down slowly and with care picked up every piece. She stood there and looked at the fragments lying in her hand. From the roof the crow was cawing. When she looked up, her eyes were as red as the bottle glass.

"I wring his neck," she said. "When he come back in here tonight, I wring his neck."

After that, she sat for a long time muttering to herself. Just as Duncan was thinking he must leave, she began to speak.

"It just some things a person don't hardly forget," she said. "No matter how long it been, they right there dogging you just same as if they happen yesterday. The war don't seem like no time ago, and everybody were living." Her voice was soft and monotonous. She paused for so long that Duncan began to wonder if she was finished. Then she went on, staring out through the door.

"They were Yankees coming, they told us. Mistess were scared of them, and she make old Master Vance take her back out on the ridge where Mr. Buckman live. Make me stay at the house. She say they wouldn't do me no harm, and I could look out after things. Never did no good for me

to beg. She say somebody have to stay. I were scared, and I get back in that storeroom, squeeze down in that corner with that big pistol. I knowed how to shoot it too. Well, after the longest time, I commence to hear something. It were in the house, come right in the kitchen, not making much racket. Then it go out again, and everything get still. I were scared sure, but then I get to thinking. Wouldn't no Yankee move like that. Them were bare feet I heard on that kitchen floor. Weren't no barefeet Yankees. I pulled the door back quiet, and peep out. I could see right straight in the dining room. It weren't no Yankee. He were setting right down at the white folks' table with his big yellow feet standing up tiptoe under the chair looking at me. He were hunch over eating, and sometimes he rear back and drink out of a big bottle of wine he had setting beside of him. About the time I pull the door back, he get up. I didn't move quiet, but he never heard me. He pick up a croaker-sack so heavy it make him grunt. I knowed what were in it. He'd snuck around and watch them hide it. Then he go on out in the hall. I come along not far behind him, but he look like he can't hear nothing. He lay the sack down by the parlor door and go in. When I get there, he shuffling through the drawers in that secretary. I standing right out in the door, but it look like he can't notice nothing at all. Every minute I stand, I get more madder.

"'Nigger,' I say, 'what you going to steal now?'

"Long time, look like he never heard me. He must of knowed I was there all the time. When he do say something, he never look up, just keep on shuffling in them drawers.

"'Don't look to me like they nobody here to steal nothing from,' he say.

"'Ain't no brother of mine taking nothing out of this house,' I say. 'Where you been the last week?'

"He still don't look up. 'I is free,' he say. 'They is Yankees down on the road yonder. They be here pretty soon. You is free too.'

"'Free,' I say. 'What you talking about "free"? What you going to do with that "free"?'

"Then he raise up. I never see such a impudent face. I wouldn't of knowed him. He eyes was right glassy.

"'I is going to the North,' he say. 'I is going to live like

the white peoples. I is going to marry me a white woman.'

"I were so mad then till I can't say nothing. I never see such a face. I wouldn't have knowed it. Then he look at the pistol.

"'You better throw that thing down,' he tell me; 'it liable to go off.'

"It seem to me like I were shouting when I answer him.

"'It liable to go off in you,' I say. 'Marry a white woman! What you going to do—paint you black face white? I hope Mr. Vance whip you till you bloody. I hope he sell you down to Memphis.'

"Then he laugh, right in my face. Not mean, just a kind of happy laugh.

"'What I got to do with Mr. Vance? I is free. I is through with Mr. Vance.' Then he look at Mr. Vance picture up over the fireplace, and he say, 'Look at him hanging up there. Just looking kind of sorrowful. He ain't got nothing to say about me, no more. He won't sell me down to no Memphis. I ain't no cattle.'

"He look like he mad when he get through talking, like he talk hisself into it. But I knowed I was mad—mad till I was shaking.

"'Don't lay you black hand on that picture,' I say to him.

"But he act like he never heard me.

"'Mr. Vance through with,' he say. 'I ain't a nigger no more.'

"Then I say to him again, 'Don't lay you hand on that picture.'

"It was just like he was deaf, and grab that picture, and give it a yank. That's when I shot him, right in the side, just when the picture was falling. He kind of jerk against the mantel, and his mouth fall open, and he turn his head and look at me. Mostly he just look awful surprise. Then he sit down kind of slow and careful on the hearth, still looking at me, with his mouth still open. He don't look surprise no more. He just look awful disappointed, like he were a little boy and I done beat him out of something he want bad. Then he roll over on the floor, and shiver hard just one time, and lay there still. And that picture laying right there beside of him with the frame all busted. I never want them to know, so I drag him off down to the creek, and roll

him off in the water. It taken a long time, for he were mighty heavy. I recollect it were spring. Every time I puff, I kept smelling the honeysuckle strong in my nose. The water were high; it taken him on off, I reckon. Least we never heard no more about him. Every time they ask, I always tell them the same thing: 'Cole done gone off with the Yankees.'

"Then I have to go back and clean up all that blood. I like to never got done. I never did get it all up in front of that hearth. Blood won't hardly come out of wood where it once done got soaked in. It down there yet. You look some rainy day; see if it ain't come out. I just slip a little rug over it, and I kept it there all the time. Except I come back to it days when everybody gone and scrub till my arms ache and my back feel like it going to snap. But it never done much good.

"I taken all that silver and put it back in that chest under the house where they hide it at. When Mr. Vance and the Mistress come back, I tell them wasn't but one Yankee come, and he never done much harm."

The sun was on her face now and she held one hand over her eyes. She did not stir when she finished, as though she might continue once she had gathered her breath. He waited. The thing was a key which opened all kinds of secret drawers about which he had no real curiosity, but into which he felt compelled somehow to look. Through all this it had lain like a spur buried deep and ineradicable in her breast; or else on purpose she had kept it there to feel its jagged rowels against her heart. Now, strangely, she had chosen to lay herself open to him, who had not asked it and did not know what to do with the knowledge.

When Duncan saw that she would say nothing else, he got up off the box. She raised her head slowly and looked at him, as though trying to comprehend who he was and what he was doing there.

"I got to go, Aunt Virgy. I'll come back."

She looked at him a moment longer. She got up slowly from her chair.

"Wait," she said.

She went into the back room. When she came out, she had, on a hanger made of sticks, some clothes. There was a waistcoat of brown velvet, and matching trousers—all in

the style, he knew, of at least fifty years ago. She held them out to him almost timidly.

"I made them myself," she said. "For when you dresses up nice."

He took them from her. He felt like laughing, not because of the clothes, but because he was so moved. He saw her watching his face, watching so anxiously that her expression was one of purest suffering. He looked at her, battling his eyes.

"I'm obliged to you," he said.

She smiled then, slowly, stiffly, with unaccustomed lips. He could not restrain himself, and he smiled too, and dropped his eyes to the clothes again.

At the door he picked up his rifle. When he turned back, she was watching him as she might have watched some lovely apparition.

"Aunt Virgy, do you want me to kill that crow for you?"

Then he was sorry he had said it, because her face clouded up.

"One of these days," she said. "I let you kill him one of these days."

Walking away, with the clothes across one arm and the rifle in his hand and the crow on top of the roof cawing at him, he thought how easy it would be.

His father was livelier that night, almost the way Duncan remembered him. Doubtless it was because they had sat so pleasantly around the supper table, the three of them, with the lamplight pouring softly onto the yellow tablecloth, and on their faces, and on the silver service which gleamed out of the shadows from the corner cabinet. They ate in the dining room tonight, as they had used to do. A single lamp burned in the center of the table. Behind them on the walls their shadows lay like the shadows of men who dwarfed them in body. But inside that pool of light above the circular table, their every feature stood out with a distinctness only exaggerated by the shadows behind them which left off, as it were, abruptly in back of their ears, and in back of the points of their shoulders. Their faces looked all of a cast, colored alike by the lamp, with the same heavy brow and the same thin bridge of the nose and the full underlip which yet was somehow bloodless.

Even their expressions resembled each other by a kind of gravity and intentness with which they looked through the area of light to where the shadows cropped up on the walls. It was because of this resemblance, and because of their sharing together this circle of light, that they seemed, despite the broad and solid table, to be somehow physically closer together than they actually were.

Duncan had felt a kind of elation during the meal. He was hungry, and the food was good and plentiful. But more satisfying was his knowledge that it was he who had drawn them all into this singleness of spirit he had felt once he had begun to talk. They said little. But they listened with an intentness he knew they could never feign. He talked about the farm, about people around, about things that occurred to him out of the past. Everything that he said, almost, they knew as well as he did. Yet they listened as though to a stranger who was revealing knowledge which they had imagined no one but themselves to possess. Sometimes, briefly, they would add to or correct something he had said. Once, at something he had plucked out of his memory, Margaret Mary smiled and even blushed. For a moment a radiance seemed to melt down every stern hard angle of her face. He was almost startled, so much it recalled the image of her which had long ago left his mind. Then he saw that his father was looking at her with a certain renewal of youth in his own face.

Afterward, Duncan had told them about his visit with Aunt Virgy, omitting only the thing she had told him. He even got the clothes she had made for him and brought them to the table. His father especially examined them with the greatest interest. The old man stood up and took the coat and put it on. It fitted awkwardly. One shoulder seemed lower than the other, and, on that side, the sleeve hung down below his knuckles. Yet, standing there in the coat, he looked changed, as though with a sudden infusion of pride in himself. Margaret Mary was smiling at him, not with amusement, but gently, in that way that had surprised Duncan only a little while before.

"I had one like this, a long time ago," his father said; "only blue."

He had come with Duncan into the parlor and sat down erect in one of the tall chairs.

"Are you laughing at me?" he said, looking at Duncan. He put his hand to his chin. His long whiskers were dirty white. In the antique coat which fitted him so badly, he looked like some poor and worn-out kinsman of himself.

"No," Duncan said, "but you do need a shave."

"I meant to today. I will first thing in the morning."

Then they talked the way Duncan had wanted to talk last night. But his father had strangely little to tell about the last seven years. For him, they had been almost without event; or only such events as he could relate in a moment or two. Except that lately he had not been well; his strength was failing; he suffered from colds, bad ones, which seemed to strike him without any provocation, and headaches which sent him to bed sometimes for a whole day. Only on occasions did he work at all now, with his hands. Of the world around him, of Bradysboro, he said almost nothing. Except to remark that it was greatly changed, that he hardly knew it, and that he went there at all only rarely. His tone, when he talked about it, was indifferent, as though it were Chicago or New York he was speaking of. Duncan went as briefly as he could over his last seven years; his account was mostly a naming of facts and places. His father seemed mildly interested, more so than Duncan had expected. But not enough to ask him more than a question or two.

They talked then about the past, about Duncan's mother and his grandfather. They talked about horses. His father's interest grew until finally it was he who became the talker, without any prompting, and Duncan only listened or asked brief questions which as often as not were interrupted. The old man seemed to gain momentum. He leaned forward toward Duncan, his hands gripped the arms of his chair. A speck of lamplight, like a tiny pupil, reflected from each eye and gave point to the look of intensity that had seized the muscles of his face. Even the tone of his voice had altered; there was an urgency in it. He talked about troubles in the past, his own troubles, when all of his strength was needed; and with the same urgency he talked about troubles before his time, the settling of the land, the war, the years that followed, as though these things too had called equally upon his personal strength. Even when he spoke his tenderest memories, of people

and things he had loved, his voice did not lose its fever pitch. In his haste, that which he revered he handled crudely, as if it were only important that Duncan should get these facts delivered to him by a hand with force enough to make them stick. He seemed to Duncan in those minutes once again a stern father lecturing him. The voice was driving him little by little back into the years when he must listen with all gravity to his father's words, and know, when his father finished, exactly what had been said to him. He was only vaguely conscious that Margaret Mary stood at the door with her brow screwed up staring at the old man. But he still sat listening and looking with a certain wonder at his father's face. Until it began to dawn on him that something was wrong. He felt an intrusion before it took audible shape and began to murmur inside his brain. His father's voice seemed to recede, to become syllable by syllable more heavily muted beneath a harsher growing noise. His voice was silent, and they were all listening to the sound of the motor. Duncan saw that Margaret Mary was still looking at her father. But now her face was angry; her lips were almost curling. She turned and vanished beyond the door.

The auto crossed the ford sputtering. When it reached the bank, its engine sounded out in a shrill labored whine. The old man stood up. The reflections had vanished from his eyes; his whole face looked less distinct, as though it were visible through shadows.

"I don't want to see him tonight." Abruptly he went out of the room and crossed the hall and closed his bedroom door behind him.

Duncan sat where he was. He thought of putting out the lamp and going up to his own room. But he only sat, almost unconsciously studying the picture of his great-grandfather over the mantel. He heard Garner at the front door, and he heard Margaret Mary's hurried steps to let him in. The two of them went to the kitchen. They were a good while back there; only Garner's voice was now and then audible. Soon he would come to the parlor, Duncan thought. He got up and turned the lamp higher. He stood there a moment. The pace of his heart increased. Places in corners, behind chairs where there were shadows, were like a challenge. He lit the other lamp. He went to the man-

tel, and put his elbows on it, and gazed down at the hearth.

It was a long time before he heard Garner's steps. Even when he did hear them halt in the parlor door he did not look up.

"Is your father around?" Garner said. "I'd like to talk to him."

Duncan looked up. It was the first time he had seen Garner's face. But in spite of the vivid image he had already formed, the face had no surprises for him. It was long, as were his neck and body. It had a great narrow length of chin, as though the lower lip were always carried high to cover the teeth, even when the mouth was smiling. His lips, when shut, set in a thin line, like halves of an oyster shell. Yet when they parted it was seen that they were not thin at all; rather they were surprisingly full, and only appeared thin by the close pressure with which he held them together. The lips seemed to unfurl as the mouth came open, and to writhe with wormlike sensuality around the words which passed between them.

"It's rather important," he said. "If you would call him for me—"

His eyes were wide apart across the prominent bridge of his nose. In the light they looked intensely blue, and liquid, with the color floating in them. He held them very steady and wide open, as though to bat them might cause him to miss something. It was this, plus the way his coarse hair lay down straight, as though bent across his head, which gave his face a look of profoundest concentration, and even astuteness.

"Will you call him for me?" This time his voice had a hint of impatience.

It was only then Duncan realized with a kind of start how deliberate he had been. He looked down at the floor.

"I don't know—He's gone to bed."

"He's still up. I saw the light under his door," Garner said. "This is at Margaret Mary's suggestion. It's about her." He came down hard on the last word. But his tone was not changed, nor his face.

Duncan swallowed. He felt that his throat was swelling, that he might not be able to speak. He took a long breath.

"You want to ask his permission to marry her."

Garner hesitated long enough so that his answer, with

hardly a shift of tone, had the force of irony. "Yes," he said.

"It would make a difference, I guess, what his answer was."

Garner paused again. This time his voice seemed earnest.

"Yes, it would make a difference. Though we would marry anyway. But you see, I don't dislike your father, even though he hates me. I'm not deliberately trying to injure him."

"Do you remember what you said last night, about him, in his presence—the way you said it?"

Garner cupped his chin in his hand. His knuckles and the joints of his fingers were extremely large.

"You think that I was rude to him deliberately—that I always am. Well, maybe I am rude, sometimes. But it's not just to him. And it's not to injure people."

"What is it for?"

For an instant he looked at Duncan more sharply. "It's to achieve something. Unfortunately, it's not usually possible to persuade people by a code of etiquette. Sometimes they must be made to see, for their own good—and the good of other people. It can't always be done with gloves."

"You are sure, of course, just what it is they've got to be made to see. I thought I heard you talking last night about 'barren absolutes.'"

Garner was entirely unruffled. He went on earnestly. He was stroking his cheek now, looking squarely at Duncan.

"It's not a question of absolutes. It's a question of facts. This is not 1835. Something has happened in the world. It doesn't take a philosopher to see that; he who runs may read it. But many people, even men of some education, refuse to see it. Your father refuses to, and look at him. How old is he—in his late sixties? He's sick, and there's more wrong with him than old age and bad colds. He's drying up down here. He walks around in a dream. And what's worse, he doesn't even believe in that dream himself. If he did, there might be some excuse for him. But he doesn't, not really. What's the matter with him is, he's afraid something will dispel his dream. It's a habit with him, and he's afraid to give up his habit, even though he knows he's wrong. That's why he hates Bradysboro and won't go there any

more. Because of what's happening there. And that's why he hates me. Because I stand for what's happening, and he's afraid I'll shatter his dream."

By the time he finished, the earnestness in his voice had given way to something almost vehement. Duncan felt his nails dug into the palms of his hands. He felt he could not speak for his clenched teeth. His own voice, through his anger, sounded weak to him.

"His dreams are none of your God-damn business."

"Oh," Garner murmured. But the exclamation was without heat. It showed only mild surprise, as though he had somewhat miscalculated, and must reappraise the situation. He hesitated for a second. Then he stepped forward and sat down in the chair which Duncan's father had occupied before. The action was insolent; it clearly said that Duncan's outburst was not worth taking too seriously. It had the effect of throwing Duncan off balance.

"There's no point in our getting angry," Garner said. He eyed Duncan; he seemed to be calculating now. "It's not your father alone I was speaking about. It's just that he's a kind of symbol, a symbol of—"

"They're all symbols to you," Duncan said through his teeth. "And not even symbols of men—just of *Man*, with a capital 'M.' And not even of 'Man,' but something else men never will be and never have been."

"No. That is not true at all. But you are getting off the point. Which is, that such dreams are my business, as they are every Christian man's business. It's not only that the past is dead, but that it was wrong in many ways. Unfortunately, as Shakespeare remarks, it's the evil which lives on while the good is often buried. We have this evil in the form of prejudices, certain institutions, and so on. But it's most striking in connection with what we were just now talking about: our obligation to our fellow man."

"Is that what we were just now talking about?"

"Of course it is. These evils, or delusions, are my business, as they are everyone's—even at risk of being rude sometimes. I'll admit that it may be I should have said less to your father. Perhaps. He is an old man; too old, maybe, to change. Like everyone else, I make errors of judgment sometimes. Perhaps I was wrong. If I was, I am sorry."

He looked straight into Duncan's stare. Yet it did not seem that his look was by way of apology. He seemed to be forgetful of Duncan; simply to be evaluating what he himself had said.

"But the point is the same," he went on suddenly. "Christians of the past failed in nothing so miserably as to remember that Christ told us to love others as we love ourselves. Even long before Christ, we are reminded of the same obligation in the question of Cain, and God's answer to him: 'Yes, you are your brother's keeper.'"

"Do you believe in God?" Duncan flung the question at him. "Or is He just a symbol too?"

Garner did not seem angry, or even startled, as Duncan had hoped. He only looked coldly into Duncan's face before he answered. Then he said:

"Do you?"

"I don't know whether I do or not. But at least I'm not a preacher."

"You are the one who's being rude now," Garner said. "But I'll answer your question: Of course I believe in God. If I didn't I would not be a preacher. And I don't regard Him as only a symbol, though He is that too. Which is not to say that I believe in Him just the way that Christians used to—as an old man with a long white beard who is capable of both infinite love and insane wrath. Nor do I pretend to know all about Him, the way Roman Catholics do, building a vast science around Him which tells what He is and is not, and what He will and will not do. That way He becomes their creature, not they His. They suit Him to their ends. I know very little about God; just as everyone knows little, however much he may imagine. I know something from the original revelation. But I know still more from the way God has revealed Himself through nature and history. Revelation is not static. God is continuously showing us what he meant in the first place. Our conception of God is higher now than what it was, just as the conception of the New Testament is higher than the Old." He paused, still looking at but not appearing to see Duncan. "It is our task to put into effect this new revelation, not to worry about His qualities. The act itself, once accomplished, will teach us more about God than all the assem-

bled theologies of the world. I believe the day is approaching when we will, as it were almost literally, look upon the face of God."

"You mean we only have to love one another," Duncan said.

"Yes. Though I don't mean to imply that it's simple."

"But I thought you said Christ had already told us that a couple of thousand years ago. What about all this 'revelation through history'?"

"He did tell us. But they didn't fully understand all it involved. They were deluded by a host of pagan misconceptions which became blended with Christianity. It's only now that we are beginning to recognize this. Here you see revelation at work. And besides this, people then did not have the means we have now for fully accomplishing this end, even if they had really understood it."

"I see," Duncan said. "Just skip all the rest, I've heard it before."

For several moments, without a blink of his eyes, Garner looked speculatively at Duncan. "I judge that you are one of those to whom it can't be repeated too many times." And still he gazed at Duncan with his level watery eyes. Duncan felt that he would like to gouge them from their sockets, that it was the eyes most of all he hated; or most of all next to the tongue which must work inside the mouth with the delicacy of a serpent's. The eyes he could imagine with a strangely acute sensation against the balls of his thumbs. They would be covered with a kind of film, like the slime on an eel, which gave them their watery look. Garner seemed to sense Duncan's revulsion, and to counter with a look of malice which rose for an unmistakable instant into his eyes.

"Why have you come back here?" he said suddenly to Duncan.

"To be a farmer. Are farmers afraid of reality?"

"No. Most of them aren't."

"But I am?"

"I didn't say that. Only it does seem strange—a man of your experience and knowledge."

Then Duncan remembered what it was he wanted to say.

"All this lecture you've been giving me. Why didn't you

give some of it to your brother?" When he saw the blood rising like a shadow in Garner's cheeks, he knew that he had not missed. It was only then that—because his question arose from a hazy memory, and a mere coincidence of names—he understood the chance he had taken of seeming a fool. "Nellie Garner was your brother, wasn't he?"

The flush had grown violent in Garner's face. His lips pressed tight, like a seam across his face, twitched at the corners. Duncan had no more compunction than if he had put his barb into some cold-blooded animal. He thought for a second, from the way Garner's hands seized the arm-rests, that Garner would come out of the chair. But he did not. After the moment of strain he seemed to relax, not in a natural way, but with an effort, as though it were his own strength which forced the blood back out of his face. When he spoke his voice was almost normal; only the least compression of tone revealed how hard he held it in check.

"You have a long memory," he said. "Yes, Nellie was my brother. And he did what they said he did, and, under the law, he was justly hanged." Garner paused for a moment.

"Do you know where Dill creek is? I see you don't. It's on the west edge of the county. The land around it is so rocky and poor that peanuts will hardly grow. That's where we were born. Not on our own land; it belonged to an old Negro. Beside our house, his looked like a mansion. There were my mother and father and seven of us children living in it. Until my mother died bearing another one. My father sharecropped for that old Negro. And when he wasn't doing that, he was making whisky. And when he wasn't making whisky, he was drinking it and lying around with sluts of the neighborhood. I've known him, when he was drunk, to bring them in our house, in the very presence of my mother, so that we would have to leave and stay away until he got through. We were raised on poke-salad and cornbread and beans, mostly from a garden my mother somehow made grow out of the rock, and watered with her sweat. Our bellies were never full. I never tasted beef, or even ham, hardly had even dreamed of them, no more than my brothers and sisters had, until I was sixteen. At that time I had never owned a pair of shoes that matched, or that I didn't have to line with papers and pieces of cloth to keep my feet off the frozen ground. You

don't understand that, do you? You were wearing patent leathers then, and you had a belly full of beef and mutton."

Duncan started to answer. But Garner silenced him with a kind of furious motion of his hand.

"But I was lucky. A man named Buck, who lived a few miles away and was well-to-do, took an interest in me; just because I tried to keep on going to school, in spite of everything. He did a lot for me. He gave me a good job with time off to continue my education. He ended by helping me go off to the university. I paid him back every cent. But my brothers and sisters were not so lucky. They got along the best way they could. Some of them I've lost track of. One of my sisters is dead. Nell is dead—hanged, as you pointed out. And you'll be pleased to know that another of my brothers is in prison. Perhaps I should have lectured him too. Maybe I could have convinced him that our father was an honorable man, and that he lived on cream and wore slippers on his feet."

For a moment Duncan could not meet Garner's eyes. He looked down at the floor. "I'm not pleased to know it," he said; "—about your other brother. It was wrong of me to mention it at all. It's just that I was mad. I'm sorry."

He looked up at Garner again. But the eyes had no forgiveness in them. They regarded Duncan with the same cold and misty brightness, like a light burning under the water.

"Are you really sorry? Or are you just humiliated for the moment? Won't you tell yourself again after you recover that you are superior to me, because my people are nothing?"

"I didn't mean to imply that. I told you I'm sorry." In spite of himself Duncan's voice rose. "I can't think of anything else to say."

"Of course you meant to imply that. What else could you have meant?"

"I didn't mean anything. Except to make you mad."

But Garner did not seem to hear.

"You really imagine that you are better than I am. Why? What have you got to show? Is it your manners? Maybe *your* rudeness is better than mine. What accomplishments have you got that make you better than me; or

even better than that brother of mine who was hanged, who never had a chance, while you had every chance? Surely a man is to be judged on the basis of himself alone, and nothing else. Even a fool knows that. And you ask why these delusions are my business. Because they destroy . . . they destroy individuals. But worse than that, they destroy the bond which binds individuals together. The way they've destroyed your father. Look at him—drying up, cut off completely from his fellow man—they're like his enemies. And the same will happen to you. Because you fled from the world, because you're afraid of it, and cling to your dreams like a child."

He had lost control at last. Not that his voice grew loud. But the rage that could not escape in his voice tortured his body. His face was livid again. He leaned toward Duncan as though against an invisible leash which bound him to the chair. Until finally, with a movement at once violent and unconscious, he came to his feet.

"Get out," Duncan hissed into his face. "Get out of here."

Garner's lips were curled as though he would spit, and the words were already in his mouth. Suddenly he seemed startled. From his manner, someone might have shouted at him. His eyes shifted from Duncan's face. Just outside the door, half in shadow, gazing in at them, the old man stood. He still had on the antique coat. His whiskers seemed whiter away from the light, nearly like cotton, and somehow smoothed down into what resembled a groomed and close-cropped beard. He stood erect, but not stiff; and he looked taller. But most striking was the calm in his face, the look of an indifference so exalted that it separated him from all possibility of contact with the feelings which flamed inside the room. Like an apparition he seemed protected by the darkness which stood up behind him, and which spilled over onto his shoulders and onto the top of his head. For a moment he gazed directly into Garner's face. Then, just as Garner seemed to recover from his bafflement, to set his lips, to get his ideas in order, the old man looked away, seemingly toward the lamp. Through the moment that followed, Duncan heard the ticking of the clock.

"I've been wanting to talk to you," Garner muttered.

But the old man, as though from indifference, did not look at him any more.

"You have my permission to marry Margaret Mary. Please don't come back here again." He turned and vanished beyond the door.

The two men stood a little while without saying anything. Garner shifted in his tracks. He looked once more with revived contempt at Duncan. Then he walked out of the room.

A few moments later Duncan followed. But once in the hall, he saw that his father's door was closed and that his light was out.

CHAPTER THREE

There is a rhythm to work on a farm which is a kind of oblivion. Caught up in it, the beat of the heart is paced by the moods of morning and afternoon. Then, some vital part of a man's awareness and his strength is surrendered up to a kind of unconscious energy which seems to extend beyond himself. There are moments, even spells of not thinking, after which the mind emerges to take up again some train of thought which seems scarcely at all interrupted by the lapse. Even when he is by himself, a man has a feeling of sharing in something; his very tiredness seems less acute by the fact that it does not appear to be his alone. Duncan knew all this; he had experienced it in the past. But he knew too that it did not come easily, that it was necessary for the mind and the muscles first to pass through a kind of little purgatory in which they would suffer a keen and burning awareness of themselves. Like a man training for something, he did not spare himself through those first days. Mostly, he helped Logan and Wesley make ready to cut tobacco. They chopped wood, and hauled in sawdust for fires to smoke it in. They had to repair the sagging barn, to brace it, and lay new tier poles to carry the stalks of tobacco. They hoped for a rain before they cut. But the sun kept burning down on the dusty

earth. When evening came, he felt limp; his clothes, even his trousers, were sopped with sweat.

He did not neglect the old mare. Every morning he curried her carefully and polished her hair until it shone. He ground a special feed for her, of corn and oats sweetened with sorghum, and a small part of sulfur and soda to make her coat get bright and fine. He even had a blacksmith come and shoe her. He made so many suggestions that the old man finally set the mare's foot on the ground, and stood up straight, and took the cold pipe out of his mouth. He looked at Duncan.

"I've shod a many a one. I've shod them to walk and canter and trot, but never for no toe-dancing. All I know is to tack on this here iron. I never brought no arch supporters."

He was madder than he seemed, and Duncan had to soothe him. But when he left, Duncan was still unsatisfied with the way the shoes were put on.

Logan regarded it all with a humor not untouched by a deeper interest.

"You aim to show her?" he said.

"No. But I aim to breed her."

"I reckon it's worth a try."

The house had a serenity now which had not been there before Margaret Mary left. She had married Garner nine days after that last visit of his. The interim had not been pleasant. She talked little, was careful not to be disagreeable. She hardly referred to her coming marriage, though her preparations were in evidence, and though each day she went out to the car where Garner waited (he would not come to the door) and rode off with him. But the strain in the house was great. The meals were stiff, and that last supper before Garner came stood in Duncan's mind like a bright dream which will not leave the memory. At other times his father avoided Margaret Mary as much as he could. When they were together he was restless, and did not know what tone to take with her. She talked to him in the flat business voice from which, through those nine days, she never relented but once. That was when her father, without warning, himself relented, and told her she might marry here at her home.

"I'll see about it, Daddy," she said softly, looking directly at him.

But Garner would not back down. He would not go where he was not wanted, he said. So they were married on a Friday afternoon at the home of the Reverend Bell. There was no one else there but the preacher's wife, and Duncan, and a silent friend of Garner's whom Duncan did not know. They stood in front of the mantel facing the old preacher, who seemed a little confused by the irregularity of the thing, and was a long time finding his place. Duncan had an uneasy moment while the old man fumbled, because he saw Garner shift impatiently, as though he might take the book himself and find the place for Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell's voice quavered as he read. He had to catch himself, as it were, to draw back and leap over the empty place in the vow where the "and obey him" belonged. Obviously he had never left it out before, would not have done so now except that Garner had instructed him. Garner's voice sounded out with as much precision and volume as if it were he who read the vow for Mr. Bell to repeat. But what surprised Duncan more was the resemblance of his tone to Margaret Mary's, like a louder surer echo of it. Or rather the reverse was true, that, by a kind of anticipation almost prescient, her voice was like a subtle but unintended mockery of his.

Mr. Bell congratulated them. His manner was self-conscious and hasty, like that of a man who had just finished publicly making a mess of something. For several minutes he seemed unable to break off, addressing first one and then the other of them with awkward and repetitious compliments, each set off from the rest by one or more sharp affirmatives sounded half under his breath like hisses. And all the time his eyes kept wandering to Duncan like a place of refuge. Duncan had long known him for the kindest and gentlest of old men. Duncan's father and he used to be good friends. He was pastor "emeritus" at the Methodist church where Garner was pastor now. Duncan could guess the relationship between them. When Mr. Bell managed (by the grace of God, he probably was thinking) to turn away from them, Duncan again noticed how lame he had become.

Afterward, he spoke to the old man. Mr. Bell had the habit of blinking his eyes rapidly when he talked to someone, the more so when he was moved. Now he blinked them a great deal. In his face was both a hurt and a question. But all that he communicated was through the warmth of his hand which held Duncan's for a long time. He thought Duncan looked much like his father. And he would be to visit them one of these days. Then, at the last, when Duncan was thinking he had forgotten, he said it: that Duncan must come to church and bring his father; that we ought to worship in God's house. But his words carried a reservation more subtle than any shade of expression or alteration of tone. It was as though his kindly devoted old heart had at last been touched by tremors of doubt.

"Mr. Garner is a good man," he said. "We must help him all we can. We must pray for him."

Now from the house all scent of conflict had been removed. Nerves had lost their tautness; and the quiet was a quiet unenforced by the caution which Margaret Mary's presence had inspired. Unaccustomed to it as the last ten days had made him, the quietness soothed his body. He breathed it into his bloodstream, and his heart slowed, and his rigid muscles relaxed. Even through the hot noon hour last night's coolness stayed on inside, preserved in closets, under the staircase, in dim corners, from where it filtered out to freshen the stifling air. He was conscious of the contrast with the world outside, of coolness with heat, of silence with the noonday drone of insects, locusts, whose keen trilling swelled and faded in a long arc of sound continually taken up by others in a perpetual chorus. And there were the smells too, he noticed, when near the windows and doors he tasted the outside air, like dust whose every grain has been infinitely pulverized. Until, after not many days, his feelings reacted somewhat. Then he felt the too profound stillness, the emptiness that smites the ears in a house entirely vacant. It was like a church inhabited by one or two who stay on, out of inertia only, after the service is over; or like a Roman chapel after the Host has been taken away. It made him restless, this sense of deadness in the house; made him feel that he must in some way stir it to life again.

But it was not so with his father, not in those days, at

least. The old man did pace much about the house. But what there was restless in his movements came of a certain delight, like that of a child returned after a long absence to a place he loves, who goes about entering every room, and putting his foot on every board and every step of the stairway, just to establish once again his communion with it all. the very thing that troubled Duncan seemed to inspire serenity in his father. From his manner, from the expression on his face and the way his eyes had grown clear again, one would have thought him an old man secure in the bosom of his numerous family, waited upon, assured of his posterity. He even shaved and wore clean shirts which Wesley's wife kept washed for him. Yet Duncan felt that in all this he himself, the flesh and bone, had no place. There were moments when they were companions together, father and son, when they talked about affairs of life, mostly matters to do with the farm. But there were more times when he seemed only half aware of Duncan, or not aware at all. He did not look melancholy then. He had around him, one could imagine, a company whom he silently listened to, and silently enjoyed in the peace of old age. He cocked his head at times, just barely, to hear. And sometimes the faintest smile would trace itself on his lips. If Duncan spoke to him then, his father's eyes would focus slowly, as though he were trying to see his son through that misty company. Soon Duncan learned not to interrupt him at such moments.

They could not wait any longer for rain. Already it was well into September. As a boy he had hated tobacco work above all other—the scalding heat in the face when, during the midday hours, each plant, each great fleshy leaf seemed to generate in itself and breathe up into the nostrils a stifling miasma; the hot resinous gum that matted the hairs of one's hands, and somehow got on the face, and burned the eyes like fire. Now he took a certain pleasure in it, like the pleasure of penance. He liked to feel, to hear, the rip of the long-handled knife down through the heart of the stalk; and see the plant, sundered by a blow at its base, lay its awkward trembling weight into his hand. He liked to walk behind the wagon and watch the tobacco riding, piled high and green, soft and shuddering, like a great mound of blubber. He climbed high in the barn, and

hauled up each loaded stick from Wesley below him, and laid it carefully across the tier poles. After each load had been hung, he stood a moment on the ground and contemplated the slow increasing bulk above his head. Until at last, everywhere even and solid, it touched his hat as he walked under. He stood in the semi-darkness and looked out across the level upside-down roof with a sense of his own richness. It was money hanging there. But more than just that, just then, it was a treasure of plush blackgreen growing down upon him.

"It do look good hanging in the barn," Logan said. "Better than it do in the field. I reckon it rain now."

It did rain that night, a good shower which washed the air and settled the dust. It came too late to do any good to crops. But it did not come entirely in vain. It brought the first breath of fall. Duncan could tell it the next morning when he went out. It was something that comes suddenly over the senses and over the spirit, well before the sluggish mind can perceive it and say, "It is fall, because the leaves are changing, and the air has a bite in it." The difference at first was so subtle. There was still the summer heat; and the leaves, already turning with the drouth, showed no appreciable change. The real source of the difference, perhaps, lay in the faintest alteration of light to a greater softness, and a gentle stirring of the air which dispersed the pockets of heat the sun left overnight, and cleared the dust out of the sky. But the effect was greater than all its parts, and the heart which felt it was filled with myriad suggestions, incoherent longings. One was reminded of things he could not remember, of things that had not happened yet, or never would happen at all. A man, his body and his mind, seemed to shrink to an infinitesimal point, almost lacking even that proportion which would enable him to stand as a mark of division between the past and the future. Thus he seemed in spirit to range beyond himself over barriers of space and time, never quite knowing what he perceives, almost mindless, only feeling things he cannot identify. So that fall in its subtle power seemed to come first to men, and only later in the red and gold of the leaves, and the smoky haze that hung upon the horizon, and the way the doves flew over high in the late evening.

There was time now for other matters. He set about finding a stud to breed the mare to. It was not the time of year he would have chosen to breed her; the colt, providing the mare was still able, would come probably in September. But there was not much choice with a mare as old as she was. He tried Matt Jordan first, whose farm was only a mile or so up the creek on the way to Brady.

He was surprised at how much Matt Jordan had prospered. His house was newly painted, and he had added to it. His barn was new, shining white in the sun, trimmed with green, a real horse barn. It had all come from nothing, from a few acres on a ridge which old Tom Jordan had owned. He had been a farming, moonshining, mule-trading, ginseng-digging, muskrat-trapping old man who had managed to inculcate into his only son a more refined version of his own spirit and canniness. Matt had succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the old man, and by processes more subtle than the old man would have been able even to understand. Little by little his tiny kingdom grew, swallowing up the ones around him, and reducing their inhabitants to a state of share-cropping servitude. Until it was not a tiny kingdom any more; it was a little empire which extended not only along the ridge, but even down the two-hundred-foot vertical bluff, and took in the whole big horseshoe bottom where the mill used to sit. Duncan, as a boy, had watched it happening. But it appeared that only the last few years had really afforded Jordan time to milk it, leisure to skim off all the cream. Duncan had known his three children. One was a small piquant-faced girl who had died in her early teens, whom he had liked and used to talk to whenever he could. She had seemed like a kind of accident, sandwiched in between the two crude clownish brothers. He had imagined then that it was they who had caused her to die, just because she could not stand to be with them.

It was Dicky, the younger, whom he found seated on a keg at the barn. Though he was not just then dressed for the part, he looked the dandy still. Or the new-fledged squire, Duncan thought. He had on greasy jodhpurs. His long hair was forever falling down on his forehead, causing him to toss his head suddenly, loke a colt in irritation at a fly. But Duncan sensed, had always sensed, that behind

that seedy-handsome exterior there was more than the slick. Somewhere inside him was a core as hard and bloodless as a stone, something come by naturally. It peeped out of his eyes, stealthily, in moments of conflict. But mostly it showed itself in an awesome lack of fear, even an ignorance of fear, as though his body could be neither bruised, not cut, nor broken. Duncan thought of him always as a knave fallen upon good times, whose potentialities were all for bad; so that, in the absence of temptation, he filled the gap with a spurious dandyism.

He seemed to remember Duncan no more cordially than Duncan remembered him. He did not show any surprise to see Duncan, or even acknowledge the fact that many years had elapsed. In fact, before he spoke, he stared hard at Duncan for a long moment after Duncan had greeted him. He led Duncan into the barn, and showed him the horse standing in the half-light of the stall.

"Would you mind taking him out?" Duncan asked.

Without a word Jordan got a halter, and led the horse out into the hallway, and stood indifferently holding him. Duncan walked around and scrutinized the stud. He was a bright sorrel, almost the color of clay, with two white stockings behind. He had good bone and hoofs, and his back was short, and his rump rolled off smooth-muscle and powerful into his flanks. He stood very still, almost stolid, though his head was up and his body suggested action. There was no questioning whose horse he was. There was nothing of the dandy about him; but there was between him and Jordan that link which can be felt between animal and strong master. He was like one of Jordan's own passions, all potential, at rest, checked by what was not so much a will as a circumstance which did not call upon him for action. What there might be of his own, independent of Jordan, lay buried deep beneath that passive and imperturbable exterior. But one could fancy that it might at times, like Jordan's own inner self, peep out, and contemplate the master himself with a cold malignity.

"He won six blue ribbons this year," Jordan said, condescending. "Good blood, good breeder." Suddenly he brought the flat of his hand hard against the horse's neck. But the stud did not jump. "And good nerves," Jordan added. Then, as if he had thought better of such an out-

burst, he said, "Fee is twenty-five dollars. Nothing but registered mares."

Duncan, having received not even so much as a farewell nod, left him in that same posture of indifference. He did not know whether it was the horse that repelled him, or simply his own association of the horse with the man. At any rate he did not measure up as a stud to what Duncan had in mind. Duncan had looked closely at the faded picture of the old stallion. He had found it in a lavender-smelling drawer in the cabinet. He had to hold it up to the light, and even then he could not see the image clearly. Yet he came away with a vision of the horse perfectly clear in his own mind; one which was a synthesis of the picture, of things he had heard, of things he seemed to remember. Perhaps of the picture least. For he had observed afterward that his view of the picture, what he could see of it, did nothing whatever to alter his already vivid image of the stallion.

There were only a few studs in the area, Duncan found; none of them as good as Jordan's. So that he had to take what amounted to a trip of several days to the heart of the horse country south of Nashville. He went from farm to farm, inquiring at each one where another was. He saw more studs than he could remember. But a few of them, especially a black one with a star in his forehead, stayed vividly in his mind. These he kept sorting through, and comparing with his image of the old horse. All of them, he thought, for sheer elegance, for refinement of line only, probably outdid the old horse. Yet none of them, Duncan was sure, could equal him. Just what the quality was that they lacked, Duncan could not define to his own satisfaction. It was related to power, endurance, adaptability; but it was not these only, or exactly. It was a defect arisen, perhaps, out of a too deliberately calculated refinement of breeding. What was sacrificed was that perfection of balance among the animal's qualities which had in the past characterized the walking horse, at his best. In addition to being "walking horse," he had been simply "horse," with a certain competence in fields outside his usual practice. Now, instead of being a creature *with* talents, he had become a creature *of* talents.

Toward the last of his visiting, Duncan began to in-

quire whether there were any descendants left of the old Mountain Slasher. Most of them had heard of the old horse. But they all told him nearly the same story. That horse was a long time ago, they said. His stock had about faded out. There must not have been very many in the first place, because it was all Allen horses now. There were probably a few left somewhere, belonging to people who did not keep up with bloodlines. But nobody could tell him where he should go to look. Unless he might try the horse shows. Odd people turned up there sometimes, and hung around the stalls to look at the horses.

He stayed over a last night in the area and went to a show at Lewisburg. He learned nothing helpfull, though he haunted the stalls and inquired of every old man there, especially the Negroes. It was something new for him, to see horses working under the lights. Their hides when they grew damp mirrored the brightness; the dark ones gleamed like seals. Light and shadow played deceptively upon their muscles, the movements of their bodies, softening the look of strain. So that they seemed to glide as effortless as swans around the elliptical pools of electric light.

Ohter things seemed novel. Most of the horses wore their tails set high, with long fine hair streaming down behind. Much of the hair, he thought, must be artificial. But most he noticed the gait of the walking horses. Even there he felt an alteration. But not until he had studied it, not until with closed eyes he had imposed it upon a pattern he had long ago from much seeing memorized, could he see through the deception. It was like a subtle caricature of the gait. There was more swiftness in it; and, remarkably, more seeming grace. But instead of the steady four-foot time, there was the least distortion of rhythm which, a hair too soon, released the front foot before the rear one had had time actually to displace it. The result was an incredible lengthening of stride, resembling the pace. It grated upon Duncan, like familiar music deliberately perverted; or like that impiety of instinct among modern people which holds in contempt the limits of nature, and seeks by its unaided power to create a nature of its own. He knew finally when he saw the winners selected that this was no accidental freak; that rather this was a new ideal of the

breed which only could be achieved by a patient and calculated violation of the animal's natural talents. And the more so when he remembered the one true-gaited horse in the ring, the way his silver shoes flashed behind him, and the old man on his back who rode in stony immobility, as though he were sleeping, past the judge's indifferent eyes.

There was a little town called Langley some eighty miles to the north where there was to be a show the following night. He went only because he must be getting home soon, and Langley was in the county which bordered his own on the west. The show did not promise much. The county was a poor one. There were not many good horses there, and the show would attract little attention very far away. But he thought it worth a chance. Afterward, he remembered how close he had been to not going at all.

There were no stalls for the horses. They stood around hitched to trucks in the dim light beyond the brightness of the ring. He found a man whom he recognized, for all the wizened uniqueness of his appearance, as a blacksmith, because the man wore a leather apron. He was a new breed, Duncan thought, the traveling kind who is hired by the month whether your horses need shoeing or not. He was very small, and he squinted when Duncan spoke to him, and wrinkled up his nose like a rabbit. He listened inattentively, and kept on watching the show. All the time Duncan talked, his head was nodding a listless negative. Until suddenly he looked at Duncan with an expression of popeyed surprise that was not really surprise but only the way ideas showed themselves in his face.

"Seem to me maybe Chief Patterk got a stud like that," he piped through his nose; "a old bone-bag. Maybe. Anyhow, he knows about all such things. Yonder he stands." He pointed briefly to a figure which stood some distance back behind them in the dusky light. The figure knelt down suddenly to scrutinize some point of a horse hitched in front of it.

"You better look out, though. He bad medicine; he take 'um scalp."

Duncan forced an uncertain smile. But the blacksmith was not looking at him.

"He just got out of jail."

"What for?"

"*For* they turned him loose."

Duncan paused a moment.

"I mean, why did they put him in jail?"

"He killed a man."

"On purpose?"

"It weren't no accident."

"Why did he kill him?"

"Trespassing."

"Just trespassing?"

"He made up some lie. It was good enough, so they turned him loose."

The blacksmith was all attention to the horse show when Duncan left him.

Chief Patterk was still crouched down facing the horse. Or rather he squatted, rump on heel, in that manner of tireless and comfortable abandon peculiar to countrymen. He had on a big blond straw hat. A tattered jacket of cloth hung loosely over his shoulders and just reached the ground evenly in back of his heels. From behind he looked like a carelessly stuffed tow sack with a hat perched over the mouth. He was speaking to the horse in a kind of whining voice. His words were like an incantation, or like the nonsense of an educated parrot.

"No horsey, no count horsey, horsey-mare," he whined. "No hoof-bone, bone-hoof, y-e-h, y-e-h, bloody-bay, bloody-bay."

Now and again the horse turned its head and looked at him.

"Mr. Patterk."

Patterk jerked his head around and stared at Duncan from under his hat brim.

"I wonder if you could help me?" Then, getting no response, he added, "My name's Duncan Welsh. I live over at Brady."

Patterk did not get up. He kept staring at Duncan.

Duncan told him what he was looking for. "I heard maybe you had one of them—a stud horse."

"Who told you it?"

"That little blacksmith yonder."

"He's a liar. Everybody knows him for a liar. I ain't got

no horse." He was looking again at the horse in front of him.

"Have you got any idea where I might run on one?"

"Nope. Never heard of no such horse."

Duncan suspected it was Patterk who was lying. He was silent for a little while.

"I've got a mighty fine old mare of that stock," he said. "I want to breed her back in the family." He paused, then went on: "My grandfather owned a grandson of old Mountain Slasher—named Brigadier. He was a throwback; looked just like the old horse. My grandfather knew. He had seen them both." Once more Duncan paused. "This mare looks a lot like them too. Might bring an awful good colt. I'd pay well to get her bred the way I want her."

Patterk's hunched-over body had not stirred. But now he stood up and faced Duncan. He was of medium height, but very spare, in face and body. He might have been any age from forty on. He held one hand peculiarly clasped in the other.

"You lying. You trying to find out about my horse," he whined. "I ought never to told that little liar. I cut his throat." Then he added: "You ain't got no mare like that."

"I can show her to you."

"What's you name?" Patterk said. Even in the shadow of the hat Duncan could see how suspicion had drawn his face all to a point.

"Duncan Welsh. My grandfather was Vance Welsh. He's the one owned the horse, the grandson, Brigadier." He knew that somewhere there was a password he must hit upon. Then he saw that he had already hit it.

"Colt be half mine," Patterk said.

Duncan pretended to consider it a moment. "No, I won't do that. I'll pay you a good fee. If there's another colt after this one, it's yours."

"No," Patterk said. "This one be half mine. My horse, your mare." But the intensity of his manner betrayed him.

"That's out. Here's as much as I'll do: I'll give you the mare when the colt's weaned. And you can breed her back before that."

"How old your mare?" Patterk's voice was tentative, still not yielding his point.

"Twenty-five. She may not breed."

"She had colts?"

"Two. A long time ago. But there's nothing wrong with her but age."

"She granddaughter of Brigadiee?"

"Yes."

"My horse is son of Brigadiee."

It struck Duncan like news of someone thought dead. He had assumed, naturally, that the horse was at best a grandson (in itself a stroke of luck) or else of some collateral branch only kin to Brigadier. That he should have run on one of those few sons was fantastic luck.

"Do you know for sure?"

"I don't make no mistake. I got him from man who got him from Vance Welsh. Twenty years gone. I made heavy trade for him—one jack, one Percheron mare, one little nigger boy."

"Nigger boy?"

"He work for me. I raise him up. His mama and papa dead."

Duncan let a moment pass. "But the horse," he said. "He couldn't be younger than twenty-nine or thirty."

"He breed, though. I make him breed. I can get colt from rock bluff with that horse." All his suspicion seemed to have vanished. He moved a step closer to Duncan, looking him squarely in the face. "You bring her soon, before she come in heat. I got something to give her nobody know but me." He had been saving the horse, he said, for a mare like that. The horse hadn't been bred in a long time. Because people couldn't be trusted, and he had to be careful. It was the Allen people who were out to get his horse. Because they were jealous of him, feared him. Because the Allens were no good. Their blood, when you looked at it, was as pale as milk. Patterk crouched down, and with one thin finger out stiff, like a single bone, he drew in the dust a map of where he lived, his voice whining and deliberate in explanation as he traced over and over again the pattern he had drawn. His face, which at length he turned up into the horizontal light, seemed as rigid as wood, almost anonymous, without any use beyond the fact that it held in place the vital organs of the head. Such expression as there was appeared when the mouth was open in speech, exposing

the decimated teeth. Then, in a single instant, the expression seemed one of cold lacerating ferocity, and, in the next, of shattered and pitiable impotence; just as a man may see in the same constellation one moment a bear, and the next a lamb. His face was dark, not like a Negro's but as though it had been scorched; except where a scar, like a pale worm beneath the skin, crossed his cheek and mounted onto the bridge of his nose. Still, Duncan reckoned him only part Indian. But Indian enough, all the same, to contain, like a guarded light in a corner of his mind, a savage and peculiar logic which white and black alike could little more than guess at.

Patterk stood up and carefully erased with his foot the map he had drawn in the dust.

"Remember, though, the colt's all mine," Duncan said before he left. "You can have the mare."

Patterk nodded briefly. But the motion was noncommittal, like an accidental movement of the head.

"You don't tell where I live, about my horse," Patterk said as Duncan turned away.

It was on a Sunday morning three days later that the mare first started to come in heat. It had happened before he expected, or wanted it to, because he had planned to take her to Patterk a couple of days before. He loaded her into the battered truck, and took her straight on, over the river bridge at Brady, along the road to the south of the country where the game preserve was, and back north to Langley. At Langley he turned east back over the very road he had walked hardly more than a month ago. It was as dusty as ever.

He passed the Negro cabin and looked sharp for the tall pine tree. He turned right into a gash in the thicket. The going was slow, because the road was steep, and ledges of rock, like scattered stairs, let the wheels drop suddenly. A branch crossed the road at the bottom of the hill. Beyond it was a cleared hollow of several acres ringed by thicket all around, except opposite him where the hillside was cleaned off, almost shaved, up over the top of the ridge. At one end of the hollow was the house, log, dark gray under its heavy shade; at the other end stood the barn.

Patterk was watching him attentively. Duncan had to

back up to a mound, like a grave of one of Patterk's ancestors, which served as a loading chute. Patterk did not greet him. Quickly he unwired the tail gate and untied the mare and led her, whining softly to her, out of the truck and onto the ground. Time and again he circled her; he crouched down and got up and started another circle and crouched down again. Her teeth, her eyes, the frogs of her feet, all got his careful scrutiny. His whine, low and continuous, was like that of a fretful puppy. Sometimes the mare followed him with turns of her head; her ears were half laid back with suspicion. Patterk stopped. He looked with his wooden face at Duncan. The accusation was in his voice.

"She coming in. I told you bring her before she come in."

Duncan's apology seemingly went unheard. Patterk took the mare and started for the barn. Duncan followed him, angered by the abruptness of his manner. He was wondering what attitude he must take toward treatment like this. Suddenly the stallion bugled. In the little valley the sound was thunderous; even after the voice had died, it rang on deceptively in the ears. There was something martial in it, like a primitive king summoning his army.

The stud was behind the barn in the shady lot which the branch ran through. He was standing quietly. Only his tossing head was token of any agitation. And only now and then did he snort and set his ears and look about him. During the first few moments after Duncan came up to the fence, the stud had fixed him with his eyes and regarded him intelligently. Then he forgot about Duncan. He seemed to return to thoughts into which the mare, whose scent reached him from inside the barn, now and again intruded. He was a large horse. But he was not handsome; never had been handsome in the way Duncan had anticipated. Age had made rougher still in him an already strong tendency to roughness. His color was a common bay marked only by one narrow white sock on a hind foot and a little star in the middle of his forehead. Yet he compelled a second look from any sensitive eye, a look which would be slow to stray a second time, which would be continually discovering skin beneath skin of what it had not seen before. It was what he had not found in all the

studs he had looked at. It was a force not only of the body, though that was powerful too in a different way than work horses are powerful, whose vast frames are all swollen and bulging with gobs of muscle; his bodily strength, though shrunken with age, was still knotted upon the bone, and broke cleanly through the hide at any motion of a limb. But the force went deeper than that of the muscles only. It manifested itself through some subtle analogy to that means by which one perceives, or thinks he perceives, character in a man. It was like an emanation of the spirit in him; a spirit confident and poised; a spirit not his only but inherited, shaped already and tempered by the trial and error of the generations which had shared it, and found it more than adequate.

Duncan sensed that someone was looking at him. Turning, he glanced straight into a window of the barn and into Patterk's face motionless there for an instant as brief and vivid as the rise and fall of a camera shutter. Even after the face had suddenly vanished, its image still was etched into the pupils of Duncan's eyes—dark in its anonymity, a celebrant's mask, with its moveless lids and moveless lips which hid the jagged teeth. But most of all the scar, more than vivid, the whitest plaster seam across a head of blackened stone.

Patterk's form came suddenly into view beyond the corner of the barn. He was walking toward the house, limping a little, his head stooped down so far that the hat brim must surely have blinded him to whatever lay in his path. Now that Patterk was alone, almost trivial in the middle of the empty lot, that vision of his face which Duncan held dissolved into the plainer face already familiar to him. He watched Patterk through the gate and into the shade of his yard, watched him take up a pick and a tin bucket, and cross the branch, and go up into the thicket on the hillside. Then he could not distinguish Patterk any more. But sometimes through the foliage he could see the flash of the pick as it rose and fell. When Patterk came down he got kindling and built a fire under a kettle that sat on stones in his yard. Into the kettle he poured the contents of the bucket. He took a careful measure of water from the branch, and poured that too into the kettle, and stirred it with his hand. Then he sat down what seemed much too

close to the fire for the hot afternoon. He was sitting still hunched over as though he were praying. A column of smoke rose up into the cedars over his head, seemed to vanish there, absorbed into the plushy green; yet, by its very absorption, it seemed to release into air all the pungent resins dormant in its branches. Even from the barn Duncan could smell it sharp and pleasant in his nostrils. He went down to the fire.

Patterk did not look up at him. In the kettle something like stew, of reds and browns, had begun to bubble. It gave off a faint odor almost imperceptible amid the strong smell of smoky cedar. He sat well back from the fire and waited for Patterk to speak. But Patterk said nothing, though his lips moved sometimes, so that Duncan thought perhaps he was praying, even with his eyes open wide and his face set in that rigid look which not even remotely suggested piety. After a while a woman came to the door of the house and stood gazing out at him. She was heavy and dark and silent; her face and her dress were all of a color. But she was a white woman; come to resemble her husband, probably, only because there were between them all those years of proximity, the same rooms, the same silence, the same wall of hillside around them. She watched him for a while with an intensity that seemed at the same time disinterested; then she turned back into the house.

Patterk stood up. The contents of the kettle were submerged beneath a brownish liquor. Patterk took a stick of wood several feet long and ran it under the handle of the kettle. He motioned Duncan to take the other end. Together they carried the kettle to the barn. There Patterk poured off the liquor evenly into two buckets. What was left in the kettle was a brown pulp which he poured out into a box of oats and carefully kneaded with his hands. A portion of the mixture he took in to the mare, holding some up to her mouth in his palm to give her a taste. He kept whining to her. She nibbled it eagerly. He filled one of the buckets with water and stirred it, and set it in the mare's stall.

"Need more time," he said. Then he took the other bucket and the rest of the mixture out into the lot for the stud.

There was another mare Duncan had not noticed before in a stall at the end of the barn. She reared back when Duncan came up, and pressed herself, trembling, against the opposite wall. He spoke to her gently, but she did not respond. She was very lean. One ear looked as though it had been chewed. There was a deep scar under one eye, and long welts, ridges of denuded hide, on her side and flank. Around an open sore on her withers as big as a silver dollar the flies buzzed. He felt a wave of hatred for Patterk.

"She's Allen mare," Patterk said from behind him.

"What happened to her?"

"She got hurt. She act up. Allens ain't no good."

"Why don't you do something for that sore?"

"It get all right," Patterk said.

"Not if you don't do something about it."

There was the palest glow of light in Patterk's eyes, fading when Duncan looked at him. Through an instant of tensity they faced each other. Then Patterk cut it with his voice.

"We go get cool. Not breed her today. First day is no good."

There was a spring in back of the house that flowed out of a gash in a low rock bluff and made a little pool. Three gallon jugs sat in the water, submerged up to their necks.

"Whisky, cider, cider," Patterk said, laying a hand on each jug to show which was which.

The cider was of a quality Duncan had rarely tasted, light almost as champagne, and cool as dew. He drank deep, in the beginning from thirst, then from sheer joy in the taste of it, the chill it sent into his blood, the way it retarded the pace of his heart. A calm settled upon the valley; a calm which grew out of the silence of faintly gurgling water, and the coolness of the shadow which now lay solid over most of the little bottom, and broke in a flood of sunlight where the branch marked the foot of the opposite hill. A scent of smoke hung about in the air. The woman came out of the house. She was throwing an invisible something to chickens which crowded around her on the bare dirt.

"My horse is fine horse," Patterk said. He took another drink from the whisky jug he had been holding between

his knees. His Adam's apple bobbed like a cork beneath the brown skin. The jug had been full up to the neck when he started; now a good three inches of it was empty. His eyes did not even water when he got through drinking. Nor did he have to pause to let his tongue and lips thaw out.

"I seen all studs in this country. No good. All Allen. Got chicken blood. My horse got horse blood—no Allen blood. Both sides is Mountain Slasher." He stopped and gazed at the jug. "You look at him—up close. He not like the others. You see why."

"I've already seen," Duncan said. "He's all a man could ask for."

"You seen his eyes? You look up close to his eyes. It show up in his eyes, like fire. Ain't no meanness in him. Just plenty fire and sense. He ride without even no bridle on."

Patterk took another drink and set the jug back in the spring. He got up and went to the house. Duncan watched him take up the pick and the bucket and start for the hillside again. Getting up, Duncan wondered why Patterk had not gotten enough of whatever it was the first trip; unless he thought it was necessary to dig it fresh each time.

Duncan was walking toward the barn when, glancing back, his eyes fell on Patterk standing very still in an open place on the hillside. That high up he stood in the last direct light of the sun. One bit of the pick in his hand gleamed like a dagger against his leg. He seemed to be watching Duncan. Again the image of him with the scar burning palely out of the darkness of his face intruded itself powerfully into Duncan's mind. He turned away and went on to the barn.

He filled a bucket up with oats and took it in to Patterk's mare. He was a long time soothing her, but gradually she grew quiet. Finally he could lay his hand on her nose. He found some axle grease in the gear room. Carefully, moving like one infirm, he anointed the sore on her withers, all the welts on her body, even the dry scar on her face, saying softly as he worked, "Poor girl, poor girl." Then he stood back and watched her eat with the new confidence he had put into her with his hands.

Duncan walked to the rear gate of the hallway. The stallion's notice of him was perfunctory, a moment's pause

between indolent tosses of his head. Duncan studied him again. Like a good painting he repaid scrutiny. The thought that the horse and himself had so old a relationship intrigued Duncan. They were contemporaries; almost exactly the same age, perhaps. Probably he was born on Duncan's farm, was sold as a little colt with all the rest. It was even possible that this was not the first time they had seen each other, that early in both their infancies they had crossed one another's eyes.

Now and again when the stallion tossed his head Duncan could get a brief glimpse of his right eye. It seemed paler than the other and Duncan wondered if it could be, even faintly, glass, like his sire's. Duncan got an ear of corn and tossed it a few feet out into the lot. But the horse ignored it. Duncan got two more ears. Slowly he opened the gate and went into the lot. Again the horse did not look. Duncan walked to where a feedbox was nailed to a tree and dropped the ears into it and rattled them. Then he got the tree between himself and the horse. This time the horse responded; he walked to the box and began eating the corn. The eye did have a pallor, like the faintest skim of milk; but he could not tell whether it was tinted that way by nature, or by age and oncoming blindness. He moved a step closer. When the horse showed no agitation he kept on edging forward with his hand out in front of him. Until at last by reaching farther he could grasp the leather halter, and the horse still eating as calmly as though he were alone in the lot. Duncan took the halter in his hand. The flat of the horse's teeth struck Duncan's chest.

He hit the ground on his shoulder and rolled. The horse was above him, huge, as though his body suddenly had expanded beyond belief, as though no effort, not even Duncan's frantic lunge, could get his puny man's body from under the shadow of it. His head struck the trunk of the tree. He grabbed. Holding on, again he lunged, wheeling around the trunk. He heard the horse's teeth snap; the tree shivered from the force of the horse's body. But Duncan stood erect and the tree was between them. He fainted once to the right. Then, with the tree blocking the horse's path, he leaped for the fence. It was high, but he vaulted it, headfirst.

He never knew just how he had hit the ground. He only knew that he lay on his back, and that the fence, the snorting horse, the barn, all were circling him in a kind of moveless whirlpool. Then, onto one edge of the spinning horizon, Patterk intruded. Duncan felt that he must get up, must be on his feet when Patterk reached him. But he could get no farther than a sitting position. He sat in a sick sweat that grew chill upon his skin as Patterk came up and stood over him. Patterk's wavering face looked brutally distorted, like an image in a warped and darkened glass. The long fingers of his hands against his trousers, like smooth bones broken into joints, seemed to writhe in minute and constant spasms. Until one reached out and seized his arm at the shoulder. Duncan struck it away and jerked back. He almost fell prostrate again.

"I trying to help you," Patterk said. "You stay there, then."

Duncan's head was suddenly clearer. Patterk's face had the familiar anonymity back again.

"You told me he was gentle. He tried to kill me."

"He gentle. He ain't never hurt nobody. He don't like you," Patterk said. His gaze did not fall from Duncan's eyes.

"You hurt?" Patterk asked in the same voice.

Duncan shook his head. Patterk turned and walked back toward the house. Duncan sat for a long time before he got up, until he saw Patterk returning with the kettle. He noticed that the horse was standing tossing his head in that indolent way.

Neither he nor Patterk ate much of the salt pork and kraut and corn bread and peas. One might have thought that the two of them sat at the little kitchen table with the lamp turned down too low only to meditate some problem they had in common, in which the woman did not share. She stood by the open door and seemingly looked out into the dark. Even now, though he had seen it clearly only minutes before, Duncan could remember about her face nothing except that it was heavy, like her movements, and absolutely stoical. He had not heard her voice. Nor had he heard Patterk's but once or twice since more than an hour ago at the barn. So that it was the voice itself

which startled him when, at the end of the meal, it came level at him, like the eyes, across the table.

"You don't feed my mare no more."

Before Duncan could quite fathom his tone, whether it carried the threat of a subdued fury or simply an angry correction, he saw the woman turn and look toward them, one of them, there was no telling which for her dark eyes; and he saw Patterk get up from the table and walk out into the front room. The woman was not looking any more; she was busy pouring water into a pan. Duncan went past her with a murmur of thanks and out the kitchen door into the yard.

He did not know what to do. A part of his confusion came from the blows he had taken and the moments of frantic effort. But it was not that only. The more he thought the more certain he was that Patterk had reassured him deliberately, had baited him about the horse. And now, in retrospect, even what Patterk had said at supper, the way he said it, the way his wife had looked around, unnerved Duncan more. He felt a little sick. He sat down against a tree some distance from the house and watched the door. The night was already growing cool. The stars looked very low over the valley. After a while the woman came to the door and stood staring out. She was looking for him in the darkness; she expected him to sleep inside. But he kept still. In there with Patterk he knew he could not sleep. And he was tired, so tired that not to respond to her mute and blind inquiry seemed to him a luxury. She vanished from his sight. The lamplight in the kitchen faded; the door and window melted into the bulk of the house. Then the light took up again in one of the two front rooms. A figure, like a solid shadow, stood for a moment in the window. He heard Patterk's voice, the whine, raised a little. Then a silence in which he imagined, and not even that distinctly, that a flat rusty voice spoke a laconic answer. Then the window was dark.

He grew cold. He got up and skirted the house, walking as quiet as a scout. At first he thought he would drive to Langley and find a place to sleep. But then he thought that to do so might lose him a certain advantage, like a claim for which his presence vouched. He walked to the

branch and drank and bathed his face in the cold water. Then he went to the truck and, quietly, as though it were not his own, opened the door and curled up on the seat.

After that he lay for a long time listening, unconsciously and intently. But for dreams he had he would not even have been aware that he dozed. Once during the night the scream of the stallion sounded out, like something wild and lonesome and deadly, yet human too, a man's voice enchanted and struggling against the bounds of its animal nature. It startled Duncan upright. He sat shivering with the cold. From the look of the stars it was late. He saw Patterk, barely saw him, by a movement he made, and something large which glimmered in his hands. It was a whisky jug. Patterk sat on the ground near the black splotch that was the kettle mounted on the stones. Sometimes he raised the jug up to drink and starlight reflected in the glass. Then Duncan could hear faintly the belch of the whisky leaving the mouth of the jug. Every little while Patterk would get up and pace off out of sight into the shadows. But he would always come back and sit down and take another drink. Once he was gone for a long time. Just when Duncan had decided that he was not coming back, that finally he had gone to bed, he heard from the house Patterk's voice raised to a shout, and then a crash and tinkle of glass. There was silence again.

After a little Patterk returned. He still had the jug and he sat on the ground and drank as before. Until at last, when Duncan was feeling that he could not hold up his own head any longer, Patterk suddenly lay back full length on the ground and was still. Drowsily Duncan watched him, reassured by every successive minute that passed over Patterk's motionless body, and by the weight of sleep that pressed upon his own eyelids. He lay down again on the seat and curled his body up.

He was dreaming. Once more the stallion was over him. His hoofs, the iron shoes gleaming, honed to a silver razor's edge, were poised directly above his eyes. Duncan's body would not respond. He squinted hard. He opened his eyes suddenly into the first gray light of morning. The moment of terror was with him still. It did not leave him, even during that wakeful instant before he shifted his eyes and saw Patterk's head framed in the open window of the truck. He

started onto his elbow. Patterk drew back. The new angle of his head made the scar leap as pale as chalk out of the darkness that was his face. Then, not even quickly, not even as though he had been surprised, Patterk turned and walked off into the shadow of the trees.

Patterk did not come to breakfast. Duncan found him at the barn, the kettle empty, the feeding already done. He was not drunk, though he reeked of whisky and his eyes were tinted red. They bred the mare. She was rowdy and tried to kick, so that they had to hobble her. But the stallion was perfect. He stood so quietly, with such a look of boredom, that at first Duncan thought he had all the indifference of his years. Until, at the gentlest whisper from Patterk, he mounted her. He had the clumsiness of age. But his vitality astounded Duncan. Amused him too when after the first moment he was struck by the ludicrousness of these two ancients hot in the act of youth. Already laughing in his throat he started to make some appropriate comment. But the gravity of Patterk's face silenced his tongue. The stallion did not fall exhausted from her back; he slid off deliberately and turned away and tossed his head like a colt.

They were to breed her again that afternoon, as well as the following day. But through all those hours between, Duncan did not set eyes on Patterk. He seemed to have gone away entirely. Yet, after the noon meal which the woman served him in silence, when he wandered up to the barn, he saw that the mare and the stallion had both been fed. But Patterk was nowhere in sight. Duncan stayed at the barn. He would sit a while and then get up and stroll from horse to horse, studying each one of them for a long time. He thought about it a while; then again he tended Patterk's mare. But this time hurriedly. And this time he was sly. Carefully he put the top back on the can of grease. He put the feed bucket just as he had found it and smoothed out the oats where he had dipped with the bucket. He was uneasy until she had finished up every trace of the oats.

It was around four o'clock when Patterk came back. This time Duncan could tell he was drunk. He seemed less sullen. His eyes were still redder, and his speech was blurred. He whined almost continually to the mare while

he made ready to breed her. He even addressed occasional remarks to Duncan.

"See, see, already she got foal," he said, running his hand gently back and forth along the side of her belly.

It was not the same as in the morning. The stallion was successful, but he looked sluggish, and afterward he stood very still. Patterk was whining his impatience with the horse when he went into the feed room. There the whining stopped. When he came out again his face was transformed. Without looking at Duncan he crossed over to the stall of his mare and stood peering in at her.

"You feed her!" He turned on Duncan. His voice had a kind of shrill amazement. "I told you not feed her. She Allen mare."

Duncan knew that he must not waver now. He stared back level into Patterk's flushed and swimming eyes, his eyes that seemed to bulge and throb within their sockets, to strain in holding back the uprush of so much blood.

"She's starving," Duncan said.

There was an instant in which Patterk seemed to gather his breath. Then he began to curse, deliberately and distinctly, with a kind of unique and obscene mastery of all the vilest images the human mind can summon up. Duncan blanched. He felt his own anger rise to a climax in the taut ridges of his muscles. He would then with all his strength have brought his fist against those shattered teeth. But at that moment, as Patterk was starting to turn away, Duncan realized that all this was not for him; it was for a breed of horses; and not even for them, but for an abstraction which Patterk had come somehow to identify with their blood.

With a single movement of his thumb a blade flashed open in Patterk's hand. A jerk tore the stall door from its latch, and he was inside. Too late, when the mare screamed, Duncan understood what Patterk had done. He saw the mare, white-eyed, crouching, trying to bolt. He saw the trickle of blood on her shoulder, and then Patterk's empty hand in a kind of sweeping blow wipe her hide clean. Patterk came toward him with the hand extended, looking intently at it.

"See," he said. "It like water, like blood of a chicken."

Automatically Duncan stepped back. Looking at the hand, at Patterk's face, Duncan hissed at him:

"You God-damn savage."

With only the slightest movement Patterk reminded Duncan of the knife he held. But into his face Duncan's words raised not the least response. All its passion had melted into that look of woodenness. But there was in it, Duncan imagined, a faint trace of satisfaction, as though the letting of just that little blood had relieved a painful pressure on his own heart. Duncan opened his mouth to speak, to curse but he did not. Patterk watched him a moment. He still held the bloody hand palm up.

"See. Like blood of a chicken."

Patterk wiped the blade and closed it and put it in his pocket. He went out into the lot where the stallion was. Duncan snatched the check line from the nail where it hung outside his mare's stall. Quickly he took the mare out and started with her, walking fast, toward the truck. He was almost as far as the house before he heard Patterk's voice. But he did not look back. Even when he heard Patterk's steps close to him he did not stop.

"What you do?" Patterk said between breaths.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Patterk cut in front of him. Duncan stopped. Patterk was breathing hard. He looked a little pale.

"She not in foal yet. Tomorrow the day. We breed her again tomorrow, two time."

"I'll take my chances," Duncan said.

"You take her in truck, in cold air, seed will all die."

"Maybe not." Duncan started to go around him, but Patterk headed him off again.

"Look. You leave her. I not charge you any fee."

Duncan took out his wallet. "I'm ready to pay. How much?"

Patterk's face went paler still. This time his voice sounded choked.

"Colt half mine. You don't take her without I say."

Duncan paused. The afternoon seemed very still. Vaguely he heard a hen cackling behind the house. There was no way now but to meet Patterk's bluff.

"No. I told you that. How much do I owe you?"

When and how it had gotten into Patterk's hand Duncan did not know. But he saw the blade come open and stand out in the sunlight. It was glimmering faintly, because Patterk's hand trembled; his whole body, even his voice, was trembling.

"My horse, your mare. I tell you not take her off."

Patterk was beyond any bluff. Duncan saw then that he was not bullying, he was desperate. He held the knife down low, deftly, like an expert, not even tight in his hand. Duncan remembered the trespasser. Once, Duncan shifted his body. The knife jerked upward ever so little. Duncan stiffened again.

"You take her back to barn."

From Patterk's face, the color of ashes, Duncan knew there was no threat, nothing, that would help. Only there was one thing. He started to turn the mare. He sprang and pulled her head with him and got her between Patterk and him. Across the mare's back Patterk's face was the face of a savage. And he was quick, quicker than Duncan would have believed. He feinted toward the rear of the mare.

Then, in a single motion, he squatted and lunged beneath her belly. Coming up he seemed all shining blade and teeth and shining scar. But even in that instant before the voice, he stopped; his gaze passed Duncan. The woman stood with a shotgun leveled at him. The hatred in his face seemed to go whiter yet, to flame out at her.

"Go in house," he hissed.

Her answer was to press her thumb down on the silver hammer, like a tarnished ornament.

"Go." His voice had all the venom of a cat spitting.

She stood there heavy, immovable, the gun as motionless as though it lay in hands of stone. Her face did not vary one jot from the face she wore to cook, to set the table, to feed the chickens. And Duncan knew, he saw that Patterk knew, she would squeeze that trigger as coldly as if it were the shell of an egg.

"You've killed too many people," she said.

"Now I kill you," Patterk said. But his tone was not true; his voice all at once sounded depleted. And what was true was what he already knew she was going to say, even before she had opened her mouth.

"No." She paused. "You kill me and you'll die too. You'll starve and shrivel up."

Patterk's face looked now as though it had been stripped of an outer layer. What was exposed was never meant for the hot sunlight. Its flesh was uncolored, as pale as sickness; like the scar which had nearly vanished, or which had diffused its own pallor throughout every pore of the skin. His teeth, between the hanging lips, looked as though they had bitten too hard upon a stone.

"That colt half mine," Patterk whined. "My horse. Half that colt mine."

"That colt is no count," she said. "Your horse is no count. Never brought you nothing but harm. Be a good thing when he's dead."

Duncan did not look at Patterk. He did not want to see him again. Yet when he handed the woman the fifty dollars, all that he had in his purse, more than was reasonable, he did it with a kind of satisfaction. Until he realized that her silence, the unconcern with which she took it, was a rebuttal to his feeling.

He loaded the mare as fast as he could. All the time he kept feeling the pressure of Patterk's eyes upon his back. But he never looked around. Not until he was well up the slope, almost out of sight, did he look. The woman was gone. Patterk was not standing any more. He was sitting motionless, in a humped crouch. He looked very small in the middle of the empty clearing. His body resembled a stump or a stone over which a big straw hat has been laid.

CHAPTER FOUR

The strokes of the ax carried as sharp and clean as rifle shots down the hollow. Except for these there appeared to be no sound; unless one fixed his attention deliberately to listening. Then he might hear a nut fall with a tiny brittle splash in the dry leaves; or a tree limb under the weight of an invisible squirrel rattle its stiffened foliage and shed a few more leaves. The Indian summer for all its bright and cloudless fragility had held on a long time. Not held, either, but simply inert in an extended pause, hushed, without breath, without either heat or cold, and the air always faintly musty with a rough incense which drifted up out of many smoky hollows. Now it awaited only the wind and rain of a single night to dispel it. It was this that gave a delicate sadness to the time, and caused one when alone to walk with an unpremeditated caution.

Edward Welsh's feet sought the bare places in the path. When there were none, the thin scattering of leaves made only brusque whispers beneath his shoes. The ring of Duncan's ax passed him as down a cavern. Once, when the ax stopped, he stopped with it. A crease flickering in and out of his brow worried the expression of his eyes. His face looked too intent for the stance his body held, as though whatever troubled him came from within. Until he cocked

his head. Then his attention seemed to focus on one hand barely raised from his side with the fingers drawn together at the points upon something tiny and frail and imaginary. The ax called him into motion again. But his steps were as slow as the rhythm of the chopping, timed by the rise and fall of the ax.

He was walking faster as he drew nearer the sound; he might have remembered all at once the purpose which had brought him, against his custom, so far from the house. Yet this show of purpose in his manner did not entirely dispel that other look of uneasiness, of restlessness only lately renewed. His glances did not seem to take in the golden fingers of sunlight resting upon the brilliant leaves. He might have been as blind to all this as though it were a transparency; or else the least substantial of outworn skins which winter would strip from the land in a single night. Then the raw exposure, the scourging rains, the stealthy chill of the mists which the creek breathed up. Beyond these fragile moments he might have seen perpetual winter looming. Walking, he shivered. Again he cocked his head as if to listen. Yet there was nothing to hear; except only up the hollow Duncan's ax—the sleepy, the timeless sound that had rung throughout the centuries of the white man on this continent. As he approached, his face grew sharper with animation and again he quickened his steps.

Yet he halted when he saw Duncan a distance up the hillside, alone, unaware of anyone else in the world, blind, as it were, to anything that might have threatened. The old man himself seemed caught up in the spell of it. Duncan's body swayed when he chopped, not so much from the effort as from a kind of accord he kept with the ax; for Duncan's hands seemed only to ride the handle, the blade of its own power to rise in the silence back to an instant's pause, and fall in a slow arc flashing through bars of horizontal light. The wood resounded sharply under the ax; the echo returned hard upon it, so that there seemed to be somewhere hidden another axman for companion. When a young tree fell he trimmed its branches and carried them to a pile. Always he moved in the same unhurried way, never stopping, never looking about, bending and coming up with a rush of branches, yellow or brown or vermillion in his arms. On his body, on the branches he held, golden

dapples of light played like searchlights, and slipped off when he moved, to appear on the ground beyond him.

Because of the noise he made in the leaves Duncan did not hear his father come up and stop a short way off. His face, more serious than not, was set in a look of pondering; but the look told nothing, like the face of a child at earnest play. He was growing lean. And with the flesh his body had shed almost completely a certain intangible heaviness which had in these intervening years settled upon his movements. There was a familiar grace in his actions, his easy bending and raising up, which suggested a muscular strength out of proportion to the slim trunk of his body; there was in them a lithe and brittle spring, like that of a practiced horseman. But what his body had cast off seemed rooted with a too-deep grasp into the sinews of his face. It was like a controlled, even self-inflicted muscular atrophy which froze the various expressions in a kind of formal rigidity; so that it was rare when they fled across his face, or shaded into one another. Most often his expression was as now, not sad, only a little stiffly grave, a little contemplative, with still a hint of something childlike in it. Perhaps it was the loss of his sight in one eye which had worked the change, which made the viewer conscious of only a limited responsiveness in half of his face.

But in the moment when he saw his father his face brightened in such a way that it seemed to belie this earlier impression. Duncan's pleasure at seeing him was clear. He had something to show—what he had done on the hillside. It would be a pasture when he was finished, a grove. Look how gentle the slope was. See how rich the dirt with the rotten leaves of many a fall; and these besides to join them. The two men sat down in the fresh scattered leaves. In the act, in the feel of the leaves, so ripe, so many shades and colors banked against their rumps, tickling between their fingers, there was an exhilaration like that of children running in a harvest. Down the hill a sugar tree was the hue of overripe pears. Another, a persimmon half hidden across the hollow, was a splash of vivid red, like a torrid and dusty sunrise.

"Remember that tree?" Duncan asked. He pointed to a pin oak.

"No."

"The big limb, halfway up?"

"No, I don't."

"Yes you do. The bobcat. Remember? I climbed up and poked him out."

"I remember."

"And Romany killed him. But he killed Romany too; split him down the belly."

"Romany," the old man said meditatively. "Yes. The big black ugly hound—the ugliest dog I ever saw. Your mother used to feed him ham."

"She was crazy about him. She used to let him come inside in the winter and lie down by her chair. And we would raise Cain, because of it ruining his nose."

"Yes," the old man said.

"He was the one that had the beautiful voice."

"I remember it."

"You could hear him for miles. Out of a whole pack of hounds. No matter how far he went."

They both were silent. They were listening. The sound was as immortal as their hearts, where it echoed still in warm and breathing chambers. They were listening to their hearts. Or could it be only inside their breasts, so clear, so vibrant it tolled upon the stillness, swelled in the hollow, drew out faint in the distance and bounded upon the bluffs until there seemed not one but the voices of many hounds.

"Duncan."

Duncan looked at him. His eyes were still glistening.

"Why don't you get married?"

Duncan's eyes were their natural blue again, dark, like heavy shade. He turned his head and took up a leaf in his hand.

"I've already been married once. It didn't last a year."

"I know."

"At first she thought I was quaint. Then she thought I was stupid. She hated me for it. She was warned, though; I told her in the first place I wouldn't change."

Watching Duncan's profile, the gentle motion of his lips, the luster was extinguished from the old man's eyes. He might have come upon a sudden and rude disappointment;

or have seen all at once the idleness of a resurrected hope. For a while his gaze wandered back in the direction he had come.

"You are not thirty yet," he murmured. He pondered a moment. "But up there, in the North— It would be different here—the girl."

"Maybe," Duncan said. Then he said, "I thought you didn't approve of divorced people marrying again."

The old man seemed to digest the contradiction. He did not try to apologize for it. He kept silent, and Duncan did not press him.

Duncan raised the leaf up to his mouth and tore off bits of it in his teeth and spat them onto the ground.

"Your sister is married to a divorced man."

"Garner's divorced?"

The old man nodded.

"Do they know it at the church?"

"I reckon not. I wouldn't mention it."

In a tree somewhere near a woodpecker took up the pause.

"If you don't have children, who will . . . for us?"

"Margaret Mary."

"They will hardly be for us, they'll be Garners."

"Maybe the future belongs to the Garners."

The hollow's silence was like a vacuum into which, inevitably, their conversation had led them. This time the old man's expression had not altered. His face was that of a man accustomed to just such vacuums as this.

"The mare's in foal," Duncan said. "I'm certain of it. She's missed two heats, and she's getting fat."

The old man looked at him. Duncan's body from the chest up was bathed in a slanting stream of light. Behind him his shadow lay, framed in the bright patch of sun-burnished leaves. His skin seemed to share in the tawny richness of the fall; beneath the skin his blood hinted at its own brightness. His face was utterly placid.

"Duncan," the old man said. He hesitated, looking away. Then he finished lamely, "The weather will break soon."

Duncan inquired with his eyes. When at length he saw that nothing would follow, he said, "Logan's already seen the signs. He guessed it would be tonight."

"That's my guess too," the old man said.

Duncan knelt over his ax. The dull bit was sunk into a stump. For minutes at a time the rasp of his file on steel was the only sound. After a while the gritty noise seemed to work on the old man's nerves; he fidgeted slightly. But now he was looking away; his eyes roved the hollow. Then he was wholly still. He appeared to listen for something beyond the grind of the filing. But everywhere in sight the hillside and the hollow were barren of life.

"Did you hear somebody call me?"

Duncan stopped filing. "No." He listened a moment. "Maybe you imagined it. I have, a lot of times, up here when it's still. It seems real as life."

"I know; it wasn't that." The old man's voice was impatient. His eyes were scanning the hillside.

"Logan, maybe, looking for you."

His eyes stopped on Duncan's face. It looked a little surprised. Now his tone had a deliberate mildness:

"I'd better go . . . it may be something." And then, "It's time I was going, anyhow."

The leaves clashed noisily under his feet. Yet a little farther on he stopped abruptly, as though he had heard for certain this time. He looked back up the slope. But Duncan's form was still crouched, moveless as the stump which held the fun-blazing edge of the ax. Hurriedly the old man turned away from the inquiring gaze. Ahead of him the hollow was empty. A squirrel made a sudden spurt for a nearby oak. He started violently. Now he was in sight of where the trees broke off in a wall of sunlight at the edge of the pasture. There was no one at all in the hollow. Coming closer it was apparent that in the pasture too there was no one. But there was something else to see. On the horizon just under the disc of the sun a heavy cloud lay like a smooth dark mountain risen up in the west. It was the last moment before the sun went under.

In a matter of days the last traces of fall had been washed into the ground. The earth took on the cast-iron shade of the sky, and a paler color, like the trunks of the stripped sycamore trees standing in the thickets. Around its periphery the solid arch of cloud seemed propped upon the tops of the hills. The house at night was like the dark interior of a drum upon which many sticks play a muffled

and ceaseless tattoo. The rain fell steadily. It gutted the hillsides; the ravines and the gullies were flushed with currents of tumbling clay-colored water. The creek swelled and topped its banks and backed up in tumid ponds where the drift floated. Inside the house, when they listened, they could hear the muted roaring of the flood. Like mankind, it appeared, nature knew nothing but extremes.

In the empty intervals between the downpours of rain there were moments when the distant moaning of a train could be heard. The railroad had at last become a reality for Bradysboro. In celebration there had been a barbecue, and a speech by Mr. Buckner. Brady was a late-comer, but a strong one. Now, down those silver tracks, Brady would join hands with others in the forward march of the South. Here in the valley, the sound of the train was faint, echoing under the roof of low-lying clouds. On clear days, one would not be able to hear it at all. That Duncan's father heard it even now could only be supposed. He never mentioned it. He did not look up when it sounded, not even that first time. Yet he was restlessly alert. Most of the time he sat near the parlor fire, on the hearth, almost; but he did not appear to be resting. His body looked unnaturally taut, in check, as though he held in delicate balance across some fiber of his brain opposite poles of an argument. Sometimes his lips moved. Duncan would think he was speaking, and attend to him. But his utterance made the silence only more emphatic. The old man himself seemed to hear every sound in and about the house. Neither the snapping of the green logs, nor the enervating heat his body soaked up could dull the keenness of his ears. Every rattle of a pane or creak of a timber was like a jar to that balance in his mind. He would raise his head and listen. Sometimes he would inquire. And Duncan, grown irascible, would give him a short answer. Then he would be sorry. He learned to walk carefully in the house, lest some undue noise provoke one of the inquiries that annoyed him so. When he woke up during the long nights he resisted if he could the urge to get out of bed. Even deep in the body of the night there was no escaping his father's attentiveness. One could imagine that the least irregularity of sound precipitated inside his head some painful dislocation.

There was little for him to do in those weeks of rain. A

few times he went to Brady on errands. Occasionally, out of sheer winter boredom, he stopped in at the Corner Cafe opposite the courthouse and drank a bottle of beer. The cafe, dark, a little dirty, with a counter and stools and half a dozen tables, was commonly almost deserted during the winter afternoons. He rarely exchanged words with the stolid proprietor. Once, after he had taken the stool at the far end of the counter, his eyes fell on Dicky Jordan seated at one of the tables. Several empty bottles stood in front of him. At short intervals he drank with deliberate swallows from a glass. His manner, though he would scarcely have had need to raise his eyes, did not betray that he had so much as seen Duncan. But after a little he looked directly into Duncan's gaze. Duncan nodded. Jordan did not acknowledge it. Or if he did it was by nothing more than a quick indifferent flicker of his eyes. But later he was studying Duncan with what seemed an arrogant and detached curiosity which did not flinch when Duncan looked back at him. Again Duncan felt that about Jordan which was a little too hard, a little too vicious for contempt only. For the first time he had the faintest intuition that Jordan was somehow a threat to him.

Jordan took an unlabeled whisky bottle from his pocket and poured into an empty glass and downed it with three hard jerks of his Adam's apple. The act, in sharp defiance of the law, had the thoughtless and egotistical assurance of all his actions. The proprietor saw it and his eyes widened; but he turned away hurriedly, as though he had not seen.

Jordan stood up; he still held the bottle in his hand. Only now was it apparent that he was a little drunk. He tossed change onto the counter. Some of it rolled off onto the floor and brought hardly audible mumbles to the lips of the proprietor. Without waiting for a count he went outside into the drizzle and stood looking about the square with sudden impatience. When he turned, abruptly, and passed out of sight beyond the window he still held the whisky bottle. Later, leaving the cafe, Duncan saw him again. He was crossing the square in a car with a young woman at his side.

Twice each day during these rainy weeks Duncan led the mare back and forth in the hallway of the barn. Then he covered her with a blanket. When he dipped out her

feed, carefully, cup by cup, he thought of it always as two portions—one for her and one for the colt curled up and tiny in the warm sheath of her womb. With Logan and Wesley he speculated on its sex. Logan knew already. It would be a stud, for the sign was in the neck the day the mare was bred. But it was not good that she was bred in a dark moon. A light moon was better. What difference it would make, he couldn't tell.

As they talked, a yellow pile of shucked corn mounted as high as their waists in front of where they sat. The crib was noisy with the brittle clash of shucks, of ears bounding upon the pile, and their voices laughing. Suddenly they hushed. The old man did not speak at first. But what constrained in silence those long moments through which his gaze wandered about the crib was the fact that he did not appear to see them. Yet the light was good and the three of them sat upright in the corn. He was like a man searching in darkness for some familiar object; his face looked drained with the effort to a powdery paleness. Surprising too was his garment—a heavy blanket which he clutched around his body like a man who is naked underneath. In a circle about his feet drops of water from the blanket silently spotted the dust of the hallway.

"Daddy."

His father's eyes turned on him with an instancy that belied the impression he had given.

"He didn't come up here then?"

"Who?" Duncan asked.

The two Negroes were staring at his father. The old man seemed to lose some of his confidence. At least his face changed; the tenseness went out of it. But not out of his eyes, which still glanced about, as though in disbelief at their own evidence.

"Somebody knocked. I thought maybe they came up here."

"We haven't seen anybody. Maybe you were dozing and dreamed it."

"I was dozing, but I didn't dream it. When I got good awake and got there, they were gone." His tone, no more than his eyes, had surrendered none of its confidence.

"Where are they then?" Duncan felt like making his point.

His father looked down at the water dripping from his blanket. "I'd better go," he said suddenly. "I'm wet."

The two Negroes were staring through the open door where he had been standing. Duncan stepped outside. His father seemed by his movements to be in a hurry. Yet he picked his way, skirting the puddles, testing the ground with his feet. He looked very old huddled in his blanket. Duncan felt callous. He walked out into the rain, and watched his father down the slope and into the house.

Back in the crib, he said:

"He's always hearing things, nowadays. Even in his sleep."

In silence, without looking up, the Negroes went on shucking corn.

The result was that by night his father had a cold, and one of the headaches that tormented him. He sat near to a fire which he had kindled into a little conflagration of logs stacked up into the chimney. In spite of the heat he kept the heavy blanket over his back. More than ever he seemed sensitive to any sound which did not come from the fire. Each one jerked his head like a sudden pain, like a keen point against eardrums already prodded raw. Until at last he bent forward, elbows on knees, and covered his ears with his hands. Duncan near the window turned pages of his book quietly. He felt little shivers of air between the panes. The wind was rising outside; it was turning cold. Now and again his father sniffled. Duncan wondered if the mare was cold. After a while he got up and went to the barn.

Coming back he passed the window and looked in. His father sat erect. His head was inclined. There was sweat on his face; so that his flesh appeared to gleam, even to quiver faintly, like a horse's hide, between dapples of uncertain shadow. Duncan, that he might not alarm his father, called to him softly as he opened the door. It did not help, apparently. His father had raised half out of his chair. The blanket was a heap beneath his buttocks. He looked at Duncan bloodlessly, as though he had never seen him before.

"Daddy."

When his father sank back into the chair again, Duncan said, "Why don't you go to bed? I'll make a fire in there."

"No, I'm comfortable here."

Duncan helped him arrange the blanket across his shoulders. There was no use insisting. He took another log, the greenest he could find, and laid it on the fire.

"Duncan."

There was so much urgency in his voice that Duncan turned quickly. But his father did not look at him.

"Have I been a good man?"

The question dumbfounded Duncan. He was glad for his father's averted face. Through his embarrassment he said:

"I think you have; a very good man."

Then he went up to bed.

During the night—it seemed late—his father stood over him. His voice was hoarse, like that of a little child waked up; and it was whispering:

"Duncan! Duncan! Come down to the parlor."

The voice was not telling him; it was imploring. He put his naked feet into the cold shoes, and pulled on his jacket. The fire had burned low. He poked it and put on logs. Then he saw fresh mud on the hearth. He looked at his father's shoes.

"Did you go out, Daddy?"

"Just for a minute." Then, after Duncan did not speak, only inquired with his silence, he added, "It was just a minute. I must have been dreaming again. It seemed so real."

He wanted to please Duncan, wanted him in the room. Duncan felt a sudden companionship with him there in the low shuddering firelight.

"You shouldn't, with your cold."

The light was rising again. He was curled up on the sofa which he had drawn nearer to the fire. Already he was drowsing. His father's voice seemed to come from no fixed place.

"You ought to go away from here. Back where you came from."

Duncan opened his eyes. He did not raise his head from the armrest.

"But I don't want to go back. This is where I belong."

His father looked at him. "You would be better off."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." He turned his head away. He seemed to be summoning his argument. "You will get like me."

"I wouldn't mind that."

Duncan waited with curiosity through what he guessed was a prolonged silent argument. He waited so long that his curiosity began to wander, to go astray in a confusion of cloudy images.

He woke up suddenly. It was full daylight, and he was cold. He had the impression that his father had not so much as shifted his position. The old man's face looked harassed, as though that same argument through all this time circling his brain had finally bested him. He started violently when Duncan sat up.

"Didn't you sleep any?"

His father answered with an incoherent mumble. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, and his nose was in need of wiping. Duncan renewed the fire. He brought a handkerchief and put it into a limp hand.

"Do you feel bad? Why don't you go to bed?"

The old man's voice was a croak.

"When Garner comes, send him to me."

Duncan looked at him. He restrained an answer. After a moment's hesitation he went to the kitchen and made breakfast. Once he looked in at the door. His father had his hands over his ears again.

The old man paid no attention to the tray of food Duncan slipped onto his knees. When Duncan left, mildly urging him to eat and go to bed, his father still sat motionless, smoke from the coffee rising before his face.

Later, they got him to bed, and Della, Wesley's wife, stayed there at the house with him the rest of the day. Duncan sent her home after supper. By appearances his father was not very sick, only stuffed up with a case of flu. And yet in a way he was sick. It seemed from his face that he suffered pain; but silently, like an animal. Sometimes his lips would quiver; or again, more violently, twist in a kind of involuntary spasm. More than once, as though with an electric shock, he came half upright in bed. He would look around, and end by eying Duncan vacantly, and lying down again. That, Duncan thought, was because of the wind, and a shutter somewhere rattling against the house. A good fire burned in the grate. This and one lamp turned low kept a soft light in the room. Over the mantel hung Duncan's grandfather's cavalry sword. Under the sword, as

though by way of right proportion, was a sampler with the motto: "He who conquers himself is greater than he who conquers a city." Except for these the walls were uncommonly bare.

His father called his name. But the old man looked straight up at the ceiling when he spoke.

"Do you think I have been a good man?"

"I told you I do. A very good man." After a pause he added, "And I'm not the only one."

His father seemed to fall asleep, or else so near asleep that every evidence of thought was smoothed out of his face. Duncan left the door open and crossed into the parlor and lay down on the couch.

He was shivering. He became aware of a draft from someplace breathing on his neck, guttering the last blue flames of the fire. The heavy tongue of the clock stroked once. It was eleven-thirty. In the hall he saw that the outside door stood open a crack. He closed it, wondering vaguely. Then he hurried into his father's room. The bed was empty. The clothes were gone off the post; except the suit of underwear which hung like a limp snow-white skin. Duncan's voice sounded out in the house, and died with feeble vibrations in the rooms above. Outside, he called; softly at first, then loud. The misty rain, sown on lashing currents of rain out of the north, muted the echo of his voice. He walked to the top of the rise and called. He had to look hard to see even the gray hulk of the barn. At the door he called again. The mare nickered. Once more, like the breath he drew, the thought of the colt in her womb came to his mind. He started for her. Then he turned about, wondering at himself.

Strangely, there was a light in Logan's cabin. He made for it. More than once he tripped. His feet scattered invisible puddles of water, and his pants were heavy to the knees. Approaching up the slope, feeling for the gate, he could hear no sound in Logan's house; only, from under it, a hound scuffling and baying at him. At first no one responded to his knock. He called. Then he heard the uncertain shuffle of bare feet. Warm air struck him through a crack in the door; one white eye peered out at him. He was already talking before the withdrawing door had swung far enough back to reveal Logan standing naked but for his

trousers. Behind him in the half-light of the back room, Duncan could just distinguish the faces of Wesley and Della staring at him from over the covers. Like dirty knobs of ivory, their eyes held the light. He had never seen Logan look so sullen before; as though he had received from a white man some recent and enormous insult. After Duncan had hushed he did not immediately answer. At last he said deliberately, "I see them."

"Where?" And then, "Them? There isn't anybody but Daddy."

Logan ignored the last question. "He go through that gate down yonder. Old Lick bay him."

"Why didn't you go to him? You know he's sick."

Again Logan ignored the question. All he said was, "He heading up the branch."

"Aren't you going to help me look for him?"

For the first time Logan dropped his eyes. He stirred uncertainly. Duncan muttered a curse under his breath and turned away. But he knew it was not ill will on Logan's part. Logan was scared; the cabin smelled of his fear. And now, here in the stumbling loneliness of a night too dark for human feet, the fear caught up with him, like the first chills of an oncoming fever. He pulled his coat tighter around his body. The friction caused by his shuddering warmed his flesh. It was no use trying to see ahead. Without feature, without any distinction save only that of a more solid darkness, the ground at some indeterminable point dissolved into the air. The drizzle seemed not to fall upon his face; his flesh as he walked accrued the moisture, like a chill and heavy sweat. Always there was the flowing branch at his side. He followed the sound of it. At the same moment that he saw, he touched the gate. He grasped it as though it were the only solid object in all that liquid darkness.

Before him the big hill rose up; he felt the oppressive nearness of its bulk. At its crest was the plot of ground where mucky graves raised up stark and weathered stones. Upon these his mind's eye froze, as upon the utmost finality. The sound of the water grew murmurous, a feeble complaint, an argument conducted under the breath in familiar and teasing accents. Until there was distinct from the sound of the water a voice perceptible. Not with his

eyes, but with ears tuned to the vibrance of even so hushed a whisper he found the source. Then his eyes perceived, imagined they perceived, the figure immobile against the fence. They had been standing, his father and he only paces apart; yet in the darkness they had been as remote from each other as souls which inhabit no bodies. With uncertainty Duncan forced his voice; it seemed that it might not reach across the space between them. But the whispering argument stopped. The sound of the branch rushed in. In that moment he felt once more perfectly alone, felt that his voice had laid that which only his fancy had created. He was never really sure until he touched his father's arm.

The old man was not startled by Duncan's hand. He submitted to its pressure. In a fragmented whisper, he said, "Couldn't see good enough. I was sure . . ." After that he said nothing. He did not seem to hear Duncan's scoldings, his questions. It was as though the fact that he allowed his body to be led was irrelevant, and what was important still went on at the place which he had left, or at some other place far removed from where his body was. They walked silently, stumbling sometimes, feeling their way, like one blind man leading another. Until finally they came in sight of the lighted house.

Through the rest of the night Duncan sat in a chair by his father's bed. The old man spoke only once. Then he waked Duncan out of sleep. His voice sounded tired and strained, as though with the effort of supporting all that weight of blankets on his chest.

"You'll get lonesome if you don't. A young man like you should have a wife. And children . . . to inherit."

"Maybe I will," Duncan answered softly.

Duncan would have liked to remember that as the end, and not what had come after. By noon the doctor was there. It would not take long, he said. Old men could go fast with pneumonia. But it was not only the virulence of the disease. The old man had nothing to fight back with. He was even now like a man who had been resisting a long time, and had spent all his strength in the effort. Still there were times when Duncan had hope, when his father's supposed exhaustion of strength seemed no more than a delusion by which the doctor had been taken in. These times

were fairly frequent that afternoon and evening. There were moments when Duncan had to hold his father forcibly against the pillow, while the eyes palely large and radiant with feverish excitement shifted and reeled epileptically, and set, not upon Duncan but beyond him upon a confusion of spectral antagonists whose hands reached out to pin him against the bed. At such times the grip of his hands on Duncan's wrists was like the contraction of heavy springs. Almost, Duncan would start to draw back—those were the hands, that the will, of twenty years ago. Each time the struggle would end in a spasm of sundered breath. In panic Duncan would jerk the covers back, lest even their thin weight should constrict the urgent heaving of his chest. But the old man would not rest. The minutes of gasping exhaustion which followed his struggles, when the rasp of his breathing tortured the silence, were not enough to quiet his body. The covers rippled gently over a continuous nervous stirring of his muscles. And his hands—they played beneath the blankets like moles sporting awkwardly under the sod. But worst of all was the fact that he never spoke—at least he never spoke to Duncan. Often his voice whispered, or burst out in throaty syllables not coherent to any listener. It was as though he had no breath to waste on the world of flesh.

When Margaret Mary arrived later that night Duncan greeted her with a look of resentment. The old man had ceased to be violent. Nervously Duncan left the room and climbed the dark stairs. Once in his own room, his own quiet, his own darkness, the rigidity of nerves relaxed. He got into bed with a kind of contented forgetfulness, and dreamed of the colt in its mother's womb.

By afternoon the next day the old man's condition was obvious to the most casual eye. Everywhere except in his chest the struggle had stopped. This, bared of cover, bared even of the thin garment which his at moments desperate hands had torn away, labored with jerky violence, swelled until the rib cage flowed in spasms against the tight translucent skin. Even into the kitchen the noise of his breath pursued the ear; the whole interior of the house seemed to breathe with him. It could be no more than a matter of hours, the doctor said; Mr. Welsh was a man drowning by degrees.

The house seemed by comparison crowded. Logan and Wesley set like statues in the kitchen. Now and then in muted voices they addressed each other. Mostly Logan kept his eyes on the floor. Mr. Bell came. His eyes were blinking and moist when Duncan opened the door for him, and he was saying that he had come too late, after all these years of meaning to come. But once across the threshold he hushed suddenly, as though he had crossed the threshold into some holy of holies. He had heard the unmistakable sound. Behind him, like a shock, Garner stepped through the door. He nodded to Duncan. His face wore the solemnity natural to it; but it showed nothing, not even conventional grief. If he heard the sound it did not register in his expression. Duncan thought in that instant that the sense of awe was not in him. Garner looked at him briefly, and said, "I am sorry," and nothing else.

Duncan was conscious that his feeling about Garner's presence there was perhaps less than just. As a son-in-law whose wife must attend upon the dying man it was not unnatural that he should come, whatever his previous attitude. And as the deliverer of Mr. Bell he had a double mission. Yet Duncan could not rid himself of the feeling that Garner, even if it were half unconscious in him, had come as the buzzard comes; he had foreseen, he had waited, and now it was his time. And however natural the immediate cause of death, he would be thinking—feeding his heart with that little triumph which was his through foreknowledge—what the real cause was. Once more events would have proved him right. He would stand as the very citadel of sanity, the lone realist in this little world whose complacent, reactionary, and dying ideas had brought it finally face to face with the real and inescapable fact of death.

Garner's presence changed the very tone of suffering in the house. The sound of that agonized breath had suddenly lost for him whatever obscure echo of meaning it had carried, whatever had made it tolerable; its significance was nothing, only brute pain, which was nothing beyond itself, which in its hunger for extinction devoured what it lived upon. He wished in fragmented and unspoken prayers that it would stop, that the house would swell with the silence which must follow death. He paced

the hall, climbed the stairs in the dimness of growing dusk, entered his room, and out again. It pursued him, even where it seemed impossible that it could reach. His very ears breathed the slow thrust and withdrawal of sound.

Many times Duncan paused at his father's door. It stood open; Duncan had opened it unwillingly at the doctor's orders. Now he thought that it did not matter, this trivial immodesty against the great and final immodesty of death. Margaret Mary sat stiffly erect on her chair close to the bed. Not a muscle of her body stirred. Through a moment Duncan wondered at her, what was passing in her mind. He noticed her hair, loose brown strands of it separate from the rest. So powerful was the old man's breath that even at that distance they shivered in its irregular currents. He did not stop at the parlor door. He would have liked to talk to Mr. Bell, but always Garner was there. Like a conjurer, Duncan thought, whose presence alone had power to trouble or work a subtle change in the atmosphere. At length he walked outside, and stood in the cold night wind.

He stayed a long time. He needed to feel his body cold, feel the wind probe deep into his ears. When he opened the door again the thing that struck him was the silence. The breathing had stopped. He saw Margaret Mary in the hall, moving slowly in his direction. She had not noticed him. Her head was stooped down; and there was a kind of uncertainty in her walk, as though she had no plan or destination. Off guard, deprived of that vigor that held her body as a soldier's, she looked a different person. He did not know when he had ever pitied her before. Softly he called her name. She snapped erect. That impression of her for which he had felt pity only a moment ago was wiped clean from his mind. In her business voice she answered the question on his lips.

"No. He seems better all of a sudden. He wanted to see Mr. Bell." Then she added, "It won't be for long."

The doctor stood outside the door. He had a lighted cigar in his mouth. His words, very low, a little misshapen by the cigar between his lips, carried oracular certainty.

"Don't get encouraged. It happens this way a lot before the end."

The upper half of his father's body was cut from his vision by the doorjamb. But he could see his father's right

hand. At the edge of the bed it rested in a kind of a stony yet gentle clasp across the upturned palm of Mr. Bell. The encircling hands were as still as the dark blanket they rested on. His father's, once large, appeared now of a size strangely equal with Mr. Bell's; the same in color, flesh without pigment, as though in that seemingly delicate conjunction of hands there was an exchange as intimate as that of blood for blood. Such was their immobility, such the stillness of the room, that the movement of sound startled him. He could hardly realize that the sound came from his father's throat. A whisper, like that of a man conserving breath, which yet carried through the room, out into the hall, a rough and vivid edge of that resonance which gives body to normal speech. Duncan realized that he had entered at a silent gap in that which was passing between them.

"Am I to blame?" His father's voice had the pleading hunger of a man shut out in darkness.

"We are all sinners. God's mercy is infinite. Only ask and He will forgive."

"But have I been wrong? How can I ask forgiveness when I don't know?"

"It doesn't matter. He knows. Only have faith. He will forgive even the sins we don't know of."

Somehow, even at such a moment, even with that intimate handclasp seeming to belie any possible failure of sympathy, they did not quite connect. It was not the dying man, it was Mr. Bell who seemed in his responses thick. Or was it evasive? The tears ran freely from under his blinking lids; his body stooped slightly downward toward the bed in token of his grief. Yet he looked stiff, and his gaze did not seem to focus squarely upon the face of his friend. Once he glanced briefly toward the door. Once he wet his lips with his tongue.

"I did have faith. I knew what to think . . . I knew what was expected. I don't any more." He paused a moment breathing. "I didn't change. Only a little, only what I had to because they all left me. It's so different. Even God is different."

"No. He is eternal. He doesn't change. It's only that we don't know—" Mr. Bell glanced toward the door. The glance did not light. Yet even its halting and momentary

sweep touched Duncan like a shock, a startled recollection. He knew who stood behind him, whose presence made a subtle difference in the chemistry of this stillness. All at once his father's whispered words rankled in his brain like some sacred intelligence twisted in the act of speech, saying:

"I don't want to choose, I'm too old to choose." His voice seemed to slip away into a swelling wave of breath. And Mr. Bell's voice saying:

"Choose God. He is the only way."

With haste but quietly Duncan pulled the door shut. He felt in a single flash of emotion humiliation and anger. Garner stood in the parlor door; his face was a solemn blank. But Duncan felt that it was the sudden force of his own stare which had cleared that face, which had driven inward an expression of triumph. He did not want to lose sight of Garner's face; he wanted to keep it fixed under his eyes. But Garner stared back at him only for an instant. Then, insolently, he looked past Duncan at the closed door, and with deliberation turned and moved back into the parlor. But he knew now all he needed to know, knew it with a satisfaction that he was enjoying to the fullest in the solitude of that room. Duncan hesitated. Behind him the voice of Mr. Bell came murmurous through the door. And his father's, brief, anguished, immediately silent again. Wryly Duncan thought of Satan, how he waits through the last moments to snatch the tottering victim. He felt the door pulled open. The stertorous breathing rose again, and the doctor went past him into the room. Suddenly it was as though there had never been any intermission in the long struggle of breath.

It was not much longer. Two hours almost exactly by the stroking clock before the breathing stopped with a definiteness that made the hearer's own heart pause. There was no sound, no motion. It was like standing upon the lip of a chasm into which a human body has fallen, where one waits for some reverberation out of the bottomless silence. Then, slowly the pulse began to labor again; the house took on a kind of half-awakened life. There was the sound of footsteps, whispers. He saw Margaret Mary. She looked more troubled than stunned, as though her father's death had brought not release, but an increase of complexity. In

her eyes was the dark bewilderment of one who cannot get used to the light. At his own insistence Duncan closed his father's eyes, and with a napkin drew shut the sagging chin. Then, with a motion so final that it brought a pain into his chest, he pulled the sheet over his father's face. He thought how in one way or another decisions at last are made, whether men accede to them or not.

Alone in his bed that night Duncan was not surprised to hear his father's breathing resume. He had thought that it would. And not that night only, but the next; always, perhaps, in the nighttime stillness of that house he would hear it as surely as his own when he listened. No more was he surprised when after the funeral what he had half expected was discovered—that there was no will. It seemed appropriate after those last days of his father's life. All that he felt was a certain sense of shame, as though at some vicarious loss of his own manhood.

PART 2

CHAPTER ONE

Carefully, as though she were mounting some dangerous pinnacle, Aunt Virgy climbed onto the chair. She was a long time winding the big watch; her fingers were not lithe any more. Not that she noticed or even cared what time it said. Just so long as it was running. And if she dozed, or for any reason momentarily neglected to wind it at noontime, it was with an almost perilous haste that she struggled onto the chair. It made her strangely uneasy to think of its ever stopping. Never once in all those years had she failed to wind it in time.

When she stood safely on the floor again, her tiny child-like breast rose and fell, just stirring the faded blouse. Through the teeming wrinkles her face looked placid, more than placid, almost pleased, as though when she had got her breath again she might break into a smile. The crow was nowhere in evidence. As it was accustomed to do it had fled in panic at Duncan's approach. Even after Duncan had left, it would not come back for a long time. It was as though the crow distrusted what its own sharp eyes had seen, or else feared that some odor of his body or shred of his spirit might still be lingering in the cabin. Before it returned it would circle many times high up, and at last settle cawing onto the roof.

Aunt Virgy moved to her chair at the open door and sat down. An abrupt strip of sunlight lay just across the door-sill, just short of her toes which protruded bare out of the mutilated and ribbon-fastened shoes. The first hints of still another fall were in the air. This summer, not too hot, not too little rain, had washed over her like a great wave of contentment. And it had not begun with the summer only; her contentment had been growing for many months. It had seemed to reach something near its culmination in Duncan's visit of this morning. She had known he would come. Though she pretended that she did not, she knew already that the colt was born. And she had known it even before Washington Naylor, who had brought her groceries and whom she had consented tacitly from her chair to listen to, and told her so. A beautiful colt, a stud. She knew it in the way that she knew many other things. Suddenly, out of her ignorance of them, out of dozing gaps in her consciousness, she would find herself knowing. And not about Duncan only, though most about him. It was as though whatever thing was fit to know about in all that county carried like an echo to this center point, this more than human faculty that was in her. Thus she knew about the dam that was building up the river from Brady. Thus she knew about the picture show—she did not know what a picture show was—and the factory that was moving in. And about the men who were coming to power, Mr. Buckner and the new man, the preacher, who had married Miss Margaret Mary, what they were saying. Nearly deaf, she could hear farther than all the ears in the county; nearly blind, she could see more than all that host of eyes. But she was content; for these things seemed to her irrelevant, like the games of children. Not perfectly content, though. There were things which troubled her distantly, like trash which is pushed back out of a clean place but which still threatens the tail of the eyes. That gal Duncan had gone to see—she was a part of that trash. But it had been only once or twice. From the likes of her there was no danger; young men needed to fool around. And besides, she was gone now. She might not come back at all. This and an old gnawing trouble crept now and then into her vision.

But not for long. Wasn't that Duncan now crossing the pasture below her? And wasn't that the mare standing, and

the colt sucking under her flank. The whole valley was like a great green bowl into which the sunlight poured. Beautiful. Like Resurrection morning. She had waited for this so long. She had known how it would be, known with that forward sight of hers. Had known also because it was not something new but something restored, whose every feature was planted as deep inside her as the instinct of hunger. She had felt it restoring. It was as though some hollow throbbing wound had grown smaller, easier, with every successive visit of Duncan's. His visits had grown more frequent after Mr. Edward passed on. For that she was grateful. Perhaps even for that death she was grateful; or at least not sorry; at least not sorry in the way she once would have expected. Of late years she had not trusted him. There was something wrong in his nature, something there had not been in those who came before him, or in Duncan who came after. Vaguely, she had feared whatever this difference was. At times, increasingly, she had felt it as a kind of obscure threat. So that it was not without relief that she foresaw his death, and knew when at last it had happened.

A few days afterward Duncan came. He was sad then, he talked little. All the winter he was sad. He read many books, he told her, when there was no work to do. But with the spring he seemed to come alive. He did not visit her quite so often. But when he did it was something as warm as the April sun. Even then he did not talk much; mostly when there was talk he listened to her. Yet the long silences he kept were only silent as the blood is silent, inaudible but pulsing beneath the flesh. His gaze, intent, responded to all that she said. It was only lately that he had begun to talk, because he was excited, because the time was drawing near.

Then, this morning, he was like something freshly sprung out of a castoff skin. A brightness as though the roof had been suddenly lifted came with him into the cabin. She knew he was smiling before she could see his face.

"You is looking mighty pert," she said. "You looks like a new pappy."

"I am," he said. "How did you know?"

"I just knowed."

"One of them told you," he laughed, and touched her arm. The touch made her blood leap strangely.

"I knowed it before. A stud . . . ain't it?"

"The prettiest you ever saw. He's perfect."

He had not even sat down at first. His voice was vibrant. He lived it over again in his words; he told her everything, from the first moment he had suspected that this was the night, because the mare went off her feed. Within a few hours after dark he was sure of it. For moments at a time she would graze. Then she would raise her head nervously and walk a little way and graze some more. He followed her at a distance. He wished for a moon but he was thankful for the warm night. It was late before she chose a place, a corner of the lot where the grass was heavy. But then she did not really settle. Time after time she lay down and got up again and stood motionless in her tracks. Sitting against the fence he nodded, only to wake up suddenly with each of her movements. In some rotten wood at his feet points of foxfire glowed. He spread it with his shoe. It made a little light, like fireflies among the vivid blades of grass; enough light to make darkly solid the shadow that was the mare's body on the ground. He thought she looked as if she were sweating, that it would not be long now. But it was long; restless hours during which he stood up many times to shake the chill out of his flesh. A smear of light showed in the east; there was a light in Logan's window. He saw the heaving of her chest, the source of that breath that fell with the heavy regularity of a steel-driver sucking wind at every stroke of his hammer.

Then it was daylight. Her hide was no longer sorrel; sweat had soaked it as dark as liver. At intervals the sound of her heaving was strangled in the silent grip of muscles strained to the point of rupture; then it burst free again, a glutinous weight of breath. He felt exhausted. He could not keep his muscles from straining in sympathy with her. It was then that he saw the colt's front feet, tiny, yellowish, delicate as a fawn's. They protruded, drew back, protruded again with each successive strain. He could not resist. He seized the feet. Gently, firmly, he pulled in time with her labors. The head came. The withers. With a groan that seemed to rise from her belly the mare gave all her strength. The colt slid onto the ground. It lay motionless. There was a moment like a vacuum; soundless, inert. The colt breathed. The little rib cage rose, fell, quivered,

rose again. Quickly he knelt down at its head. He laid one hand on the slick bony shoulder. The small body was hot with life. Its breath rattled, but with a steady rhythm. With his fingers Duncan cleared the half-clogged nostrils. The sun came up suddenly; the pasture flashed brilliant green. Everywhere dew studded the grass with a myriad silver points. He saw Logan. His shout filled the valley, answered itself from the bluff, died in the hollow behind him.

Logan and Wesley stood over the colt.

"He sure fine, Master Duncan," Logan said. "I told you it be a stud."

"Ain't that some blaze," Wesley said. "You couldn't of painted it no better. And two white stockings behind."

"Hasn't he got good legs, Logan?"

"He going to be a horse."

"Going to be sorrel, like his mammy," Wesley said.

"No he ain't. He be chestnut."

"Look like sorrel to me."

"He be chestnut," Logan said deliberately.

The colt was stirring. From time to time it raised its head and looked with a kind of unsteady bewilderment.

Logan spoke suddenly, and pointed. "He got it too, Master Duncan."

Duncan saw. Before, that eye had been to the ground. Logan was right; but he was only half right. Only a part of the eye was glass, a section like a crude triangular wedge in the lower hemisphere. The effect was strange; the eye with its contrast of crystal and smoke-blue seemed not to belong in the tiny head. It disturbed; in the way that one might be disturbed by a look of too much experience in the face of a child. Duncan looked at it uneasily. It troubled him like a blemish on near perfection. When the colt's head came up for good, when the body had struggled onto its belly, onto two of the enormous and unmanageable legs, Duncan brought his hand close to the eye. It blinked; there was nothing wrong with it. Relieved, he straightened up.

Before long the real struggle began. The mare had got up finally. She stood over her foal. From time to time she urged him with her nose. Then, to Duncan's glance, she looked suddenly and shockingly depleted. Her sides were caved in, her hide sagged over the craggy bones of her rump, her eyes were sunk deeper still in her head. With

the colt she had given up the last of that vital stuff which had preserved her body from time. Now her eager concern for the colt seemed senile and pathetic. Duncan glanced at her bag.

But there was no time now; the colt seemed to have discovered what those unruly legs were for. It had managed to gather the hind ones nearly together. Then, with the new-felt power, it shoved. But the front legs, braced out forward like stilts, were too close together. The colt's body reeled, and flopped onto its side.

"He doing fine," Logan laughed. "Don't need nothing but time."

The struggle was painful. The legs seemed too many and too long to handle all at once. It was with a sense of the miraculous that they saw it finally standing erect on its spraddled legs, looking around it with something like amazement.

"You ain't no more surprised than I is," Wesley said to the colt.

After that the blind search began. The colt wobbled perilously up and down the length of the mare's body. It tried her chest, her belly, her tail.

"He ain't liable to get nothing in none of them places," Wesley said.

Only the colt and the mare kept their patience. Duncan wanted to guide the colt, but Logan warned him. It was for nature to do, he said. It was bad to go messing in. So they waited. The colt found his reward at last. But it sucked delicately in the beginning, as though uncertain whether this was what it had sought. It was only when the little flaxen bush of tail began to wiggle that they knew the milk was coming free. For now, anyway, the mare seemed able to carry it.

Duncan had stayed nearly an hour at Aunt Virgy's. Walking back, he felt how sleepy he was, and hungry. But he went first to the pasture. He carried feed and water to where the mare stood dejected under a tree. The colt nosed his hand. He gave it his thumb to suck, and felt the hot moist constriction of the mouth upon his flesh.

In the house he had ham and corn bread and coffee. He

went into the parlor and stretched out on the couch. Sleep did not come in the rush he had anticipated. But he had a comfortable sense of release from the weight of his body, of ease from the strain to which the hours of intensity and of elation had brought him. His mind drifted without momentum; as it were, outside of his body, contemplating his peace. Then, somewhere in the house, a door swung shut. The noise made a gap in the silence. And when the silence rushed in again, he heard it. He rarely did any more; use had made him deaf to it. When he did hear he grew restless. So that months before he had let the clock stop finally, because it seemed the very heartbeat of the stillness which pursued him even into his bedroom upstairs. But there was no escaping it always. At times, as now, he caught himself deliberately listening. Then the restlessness grew inside him like hunger in the stomach which has neglected a meal; and something beyond hunger only, something vaguely imperative which urged him to partake of what he desired.

Suddenly he opened his eyes. He saw the square face of the clock, and his mind registered its unchanging hour. Then, just as suddenly, it came to him that there was no longer cause for restlessness. What he had wanted he had now. It was there in the flesh, tottering about the pasture. In a matter of days it would be galloping. Then the little body would thicken, the chest grow deep, the neck swell with muscle into the neck of a stallion. And under its feet was the fat green earth; and around it fields dark green with corn and black-green with tobacco. And above them, all around, the wall of bluff and hillside made its own horizon. His mind's eye feasted on the vision. He dozed.

He drifted out of sleep as out of water. He could not remember what he had been dreaming, but it was something illicit, he knew. He had a momentary sense of guilt, as when in childhood he had waked up out of such dreams. Then her image formed in his mind. He saw her again as he had seen her that first time in the early summer. He was crossing the shoal just below the dam, stepping carefully from rock to rock. For this reason he did not see her until he was close. Nor was she conscious of his presence. The downrush of water muted all sounds nearby. But more than this was the depth of meditation in which she appeared

submerged. She sat on a large stone which cropped up near the foot of the dam a few feet out from the high rock bank. Her bare feet hung in the swirling pool. Her body was tilted a little to the side resting on one stiff arm, like a prop, and her face was turned down toward the water. Spray from a falling silver spout settled just shy of her legs. He imagined that she could feel on her bare flesh keen little droplets of water. How still she was; as still as the rock she sat on; a stillness which in a body so young and alive was in itself a kind of sadness. He wanted to see her face. But the angle at which she held it and the way her brown hair fell down over her cheek and chin prevented him. Until she turned her head and saw him gazing at her. She looked confused. She drew up her feet out of the water, as though he had caught her in some act of immodesty. He nodded to her, and stepped from the last rock, where he had paused, onto the bank. He hesitated again. He fumbled for something to say. She had been looking sidelong at him while he faced away from her. He raised his voice to make her hear over the sound of falling water.

"You look comfortable."

She looked embarrassed again, but she smiled briefly. At first glance he thought that her face was not pretty. Then he thought that it was, in an antique sort of way; very solemn once the smile had faded. It reminded him of a type of looks which was out of fashion, like that of Madonnas he had seen; the oval face and pointed chin, the dark eyes set wide across the high bridge of the nose. Only the mouth which was a little heavy-lipped, a little pouting at the corners, seemed not quite to belong in the face, and injected into it the least jar of discordance. But even that was not unattractive. It seemed to say only that something yet was lacking to the fulfillment of her serenity. This thought made him pause longer.

"Do you ever go swimming here?"

She could not hear him above the sound of the water. She raised her eyebrows in deliberate apology. The irises of her eyes, drowning the pupils in their darkness, seemed disproportionately large against the exposed whites. He used the excuse to step closer.

"I say, do you ever go swimming here?"

She nodded. "Sometimes."

"It's a good place. I used to go here a lot when I was a boy."

She looked at her feet, resting now rather awkwardly on the side of the rock. She did not seem to know what to do with them, as though she were ashamed of their bareness.

"I used to think it was brave to crawl back under the falls."

"You're Mr. Welsh, ain't you?"

"Yes." He had almost said "Duncan," then caught himself. "Do you live over there, in the bottom?"

She nodded her head once, vaguely, as though the admission were one she had sooner not make emphatic. He was sorry now he had asked her. Here, with the rock bluff behind her and the spray falling at her feet, she was herself only, and not that self who cooked and scrubbed in a cropper's cabin, whose father and brothers sweated in someone else's field.

"We've just been living there a few years," she said. "We used to live up on the ridge. Daddy owned a place up there."

"The Roundtree place?" Duncan chanced.

"That's it." She looked at him more warmly. "The white house, with the green shutters and the tall cedar tree."

"I remember riding up there with Daddy when I was a boy. There were some little kids playing on the porch. I'll bet you were one of them." He did remember. It was just before the Roundtrees were ready to move out. And it wasn't just a few years ago. And the house wasn't white; it was no color at all; and high weeds grew around the yard fence.

"Daddy's going to buy it back one of these days," she said seriously.

"I guess you'll be glad, won't you?"

"I sure will. I don't like it much down here. I never have felt like I really lived here."

He nodded his understanding. He was silently amused.

"I don't like our neighbors very much," she was saying.

"I'd like it better if they was—were nicer."

"What about the Baxters? He seems like a nice fellow."

"Oh, they're all right, I guess. If just they wasn't so messy."

The taint of snobbery in her words, if it deserved the name at all, did not offend him. Whatever there was vulgar in them was tempered out by her obvious innocence, like coarse phrases uttered by a rote from the mouth of a child. He even thought that in a way, perhaps, it was to her credit; that it sprang from a sensitiveness too deep for her lot in life, and only found corrupt expression by the very fact of her innocence and of her embarrassment at her condition. Blood turned up that way sometimes, after skipping a generation. So that she herself, maybe, was the true heir of her grandfather who had been a man of parts and the owner of considerable land.

She was looking down at the water. Again the falling hair obscured her face. Suddenly she stood up on the stone with an agility that both surprised and refreshed the eye. On the little area of round-topped stone, perilously little for standing, she stood quite naturally, as though newly risen out of the water. All of a sudden she looked more mature than he had thought. Her body was the body of a woman. Her breast was full; and below her waist the faded print dress swelled over the slow curves of her hips and buttocks. Her legs were heavy; but, like all her body, not with mass; rather with an appearance of strength which is saved by gentleness of contour from the gross look of power. Then, without seeming to calculate, with a long step that was half a leap, she reached the ledge across the little strait. The movement was as light as straw, as though her body were no weight at all upon the supple strength of her legs.

Her sandals were there on the ledge. Quickly she slipped her feet into them. She looked up at Duncan. Again she looked a little embarrassed.

"I've got to be going," Duncan said. "I'll be seeing you."

But after a step or two, he paused.

"By the way, you didn't tell me your name."

She blushed faintly. "Nettie," she said. "Nettie Round-tree."

Almost involuntarily he said, "Mine's Duncan."

When he reached the crest of the bank, he glanced back. She was still watching him from the ledge.

He wanted to see her again, but every scheme he thought of seemed clumsy. He could not simply visit her at her

house, her cabin, like a beau, under the eyes of her family. He thought of how his father would have reacted to such a visit. Yet this seemed the only way, an impossible way. He had seen her once more, however, only two weeks later, in Brady. He talked to her for a minute. She was going to Nashville to visit her sister who was married and lived there. She would be gone all summer. Maybe longer, if she liked it and found a job. Momentarily he had an urge to warn her, to lead her off and in private talk to her about life in a place like that; to tell her never to be ashamed of the things she was, to value those things and guard them. In her innocence, she did not belong in such a place. But two months was a brief time, if that was all it was to be. Already they had nearly passed. Perhaps even now she was at home again and he would meet her soon and ask her about her summer. He would invite her to come and see his colt. Her family need not even know about it. He sat up on the couch. He felt for a moment the loneliness of the house. Then he went out and walked up into the pasture.

They cut the tobacco. It was good this year, with deep green leaves as long as a man's arm.

"It'll weigh something," Logan said. He held up a rich stalk of it. His hand was buried under the leaves. The plant, held up in the slanting sunlight, seemed to throw over his still body its own green shadow; one could fancy the great fleshy plant had sprouted from his wrist. And there was hay to take up, sweet alfalfa as heavy and full of sap as at the June cutting. From atop the hay wagon where he was loading, Duncan often paused and gazed toward the colt in the pasture. Now, the little bony frame was beginning to take shape. Muscles had begun to swell in the narrow neck and rump. And it ran. In bursts of speed that seemed incredible, like something whirled on a string, it circled the lethargic mare. Its tail stood out like a stiff blond brush; the flying legs were a blur under its body. Every day more than once Duncan caught the colt and stroked it. He fed it bits of sugar, and laughed under his breath at the moist tickling of the lips and tongue in the palm of his hand. With a halter he had made from an old plowline he taught the colt to lead. But not without more effort than he had reckoned on. Such stubbornness

in a colt so young and so much handled from birth surprised him. But this was a good sign, Logan said. A horse was no account which gave up easy. What did worry Duncan was the mare, because of her milk. She looked as gaunt as on the day she had brought the colt. Her movements were feeble, and she ate with indifference the sweetened feed which Duncan gave her. Already he had made preparation to put the colt on a bottle the moment it might become necessary.

Then the hay was in. There was a gap in the work that would last until after frost had driven the last sap out of the corn. More than at any time since he had come home, he felt restless. He could not but admit that the colt had disappointed him. Not in itself, for it was perfect. The disappointment arose from the fact that it had not filled his life to overflowing. As always, the thing itself had not lived up to the anticipation of it. This was a truth he had known a long time. He wondered that so many such experiences had not better schooled him. But perhaps this was a truth that men in their hearts never really learned, because they needed not to know, and, for the sake of spells of pure contentment, with deliberation guarded the root of their ignorance. In this the heart was wise. It knew how barren was the fact itself once the illusions through which it appeared have been torn from around it. Many times he had thought of the crystal paperweight that used to sit on his father's desk, how much life was like that. Inside was a red stone which looked as big as a hickory nut. In the light it glowed like a ruddy little sun. One day he yielded to temptation, and shattered the crystal. But all that he found inside was the puniest fragment of pale red coral. He threw it away in disgust.

Several times, for no reason except his restlessness, he went to Brady and stood around under the trees in the courthouse yard. Many of the old men who sat and played checkers, or stood around and talked by the hour spitting dark wads of tobacco juice into the dust, Duncan was familiar with. Some he knew well enough to talk to, briefly, about crops and weather and local events. But these old men gathered here at this central spot were no longer the heart of the town. They were here as on a shaded island, condemned to look out in idleness upon the sun-flooded

square where a new life of thundering trucks and busy hatless strangers in sport shirts was coming into being. But they gave no sign that they noticed it. They did not even glance at the many intruders, unknown or barely familiar to them, who stepped hurriedly and abstractedly past up the courthouse walk, as though these old men had been no more than furniture in the yard. Mr. Berridge, once the mayor, for all his years still ruddy and crudely handsome in his patched shirt and shapeless felt hat, lolled like a great bear over the checkerboard. He scarcely raised his eyes when a big truck backfired like a gunshot from across the square. He won every game. Challenger after challenger from the group standing around took his seat only to go down before the old man's cunning. He talked when he played, as though simply to win required only half his skill. He swapped tales with other men, about old times when Brady was so small you could jump a rabbit in this courthouse yard where they were playing. But at times, when Mr. Berridge raised his head and looked out into the sunlit square, Duncan imagined that a flicker crossed his eyes, as though he were swallowing hard and secretly. Then Duncan would remember that Mr. Berridge was one of those meant in the epigram which Ty Wallace, wit and owner of the new garage and auto agency, had turned loose in the town: "What Brady needs is a few first-class funerals." It had spread with a chuckle from mouth to mouth. Perhaps the old man himself had heard it and known whom Wallace had meant.

There was much that was changing in the town. A new street was being cut through the long block on the east side of the square. Where the blacksmith shop had stood, a brick building was going up which would house the offices of the state and federal governments. And there was the picture show, and, on the southwest side of the square, a new filling station shaped like a box, with sides the color of caramel candy, and a line of helmeted and gaudy gas pumps. But most he noticed unfamiliar faces. Some looked like natives whom he had never known, or had forgotten. Others were new people come in to work on the dam or in the shoe factory, or to participate in the boom which the change of times and fortune had brought to Brady. Often, when passing groups of such men on the streets,

he felt momentarily like a stranger in town. Now and then he met old school friends. But a minute's conversation always assured him how little he had in common with them now. The two who had been his real friends, Adam Binkley and Howard Reeks, like so many others of better than average gifts and upbringing, had gone years ago to the city to make their living. If only there were one person, he thought; only one with whom he could really share his mind.

One Sunday, as obscurely as he could manage it, he slipped into a rear pew of the Methodist church. He had not set eyes on Garner, nor Margaret Mary either, in months. He did so now with a curiosity which was half that kind of revulsion that compels one to gaze at corpses. But even in his hatred Duncan had to admit that Garner was impressive. His text was: "Verily, verily, I say unto you; inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these, ye have done it also unto Me." It was Garner's perennial text, Duncan thought; insisted upon Sunday after Sunday in one guise or another. But that the congregation recognized no monotony in the subject was evident from their faces. They listened. Even in the rear pews where the temptation for sleep was great, all faces were fixed on the pulpit; all but those of a few old people whose habits were set beyond altering. It surprised Duncan at first; but not for long, in spite of the sharp difference between Garner and his predecessors. He spoke almost without gestures. But his eyes were busy; not a person in the congregation seemed to escape his cold blue glance. Even Duncan in his obscure position felt that his every expression was being watched, and he felt the muscles of his face grown stiff. When Garner moved a hand it was a gesture short and emphatic, like the brief fall of a hatchet which clips the loose ends from a knot that has been tied. His public voice was a hollow tenor that suggested but was not shrillness. At moments it disturbed the ear, as though in the process of modulation it had just fallen short of the proper key. It was not like a revivalist's voice, not outwardly emotional; except sometimes when into the even rationality of his tone a note of moral outrage crept. But most effective was the sense of certainty and authority with which he spoke. He was like one to whom the call of Christ was a call indeed, or even

a stroke, rather than merely an insistent whisper. Caught up in that certainty, the listener, even if he were capable of it, forgot all sense of criticism. Or if, like Duncan, he did seek to criticize he was, in those moments, struck with a feeling of helplessness, as though he were attacking the perfect syllogism. At such times the feeling grew in Duncan to a kind of sinking fear. He lowered his face out of Garner's sight, and longed to be outside to answer these points as he had so many times before in the clear sunshine. But he stayed on, observing Garner, how he seemed never to stray too far from Scripture; how at the vital moment he brought in some quotation that clinched his social argument and fused it with piety. Thus what was omitted was also left obscured. No one knew better than Garner, Duncan thought, how to make one world out of two. And excepting himself and probably Mr. Bell, who sat looking very little in a front pew next to the wall, Duncan wondered who else in all that congregation was aware of the perversion.

He would not go back any more. The visit had, if anything, only increased his hatred for Garner. And, he had to admit, his fear of him as a man whose powers extended far beyond what Duncan had imagined. Then it occurred to him that Garner was too good for Brady, and that, ambitious, he would leave in search of bigger harvests. But immediately Duncan realized that this would never be. Garner would stay for good, compelled by that fanatic moral earnestness of his, by what he reckoned to be his high purpose in coming here at all. It would just suit him, this sense of martyrdom which the obscurity of life in Brady, even as a man of great local importance, would in all probability give him. Assuredly here he had lit on fertile ground. Duncan remembered the faces of the congregation, naive country faces, the stupid faces of sheep turned up expectantly toward one who would feed them. For the first time Duncan felt contempt for the lot of them. Abjectly they would let themselves be argued, cozened, bullied, shamed, perverted into casting off their natures. And Garner, John the Baptist, flanked by the growing forces of the new Truth, would have made straight the way.

The next few days Duncan went hunting in the afternoons. More than anything else he wanted to be alone in

the woods. The October weather was beautiful. The woods were cool and still and bronze with the shafts of sunlight which cut through the foliage overhead. He shot only when the shot was long and difficult. Then, when he killed a squirrel and had the warm furry body in his hand, he was half sorry he had done it. He liked to think of the woods full of life; full of squirrels and coons and possums; full even of the destroyers, the catamounts and foxes and hawks and rattlesnakes. He longed for the soft-eyed deer that had vanished since he was a boy.

After the second day he did not take his gun. He simply walked as quietly as he could and tried not to disturb the silence. There was a deep hollow, Sodic Hollow, with sides almost like bluffs, which opened onto the creek and climbed north onto the plateau nearly a mile beyond the boundary of his land. He turned up this hollow, walking as in his boyhood, quietly, like a scout. At a smaller hollow which opened into the big one, he turned again and kept near to the running branch. So closely was he studying the silence of his movements that his first awareness of the heavy mellow smell was a shock, like an unexpected near-collision with a perfumed woman. In that instant he heard a growl, deep, prolonged through a moment, that died and then took up again. First he saw the dog's teeth, the stained and blunted tushes. And next the eyes. In their darkness, there seemed to be no focal point; they looked blind. But they were not blind, for the dog stiffened when Duncan moved his hand. It was orange-colored, as big as a mastiff; but in shape, it resembled an over-muscled hound. The ears, though they dropped, were short and ragged, as if they had been chewed off. Its whole body, especially its head, was laced with scars. Duncan stood motionless. He started to speak to the dog. But all at once, strangely, as though it had forgotten him, the dog turned away and walked a little distance up the hollow and lay down against a barrel.

For the first time Duncan looked at the still. He could see nobody around. Just ahead of him in a kind of cove where the hollow momentarily broadened he saw a group of barrels and metal drums, and a kettle, and a copper pot with coiled pipes protruding from the top. The high hills on either side and the trees that met overhead hid the still

from above. But within the hollow itself there was no attempt at concealment. The still sprawled across the little clearing. It was as though the owner had put it here for the simple reason that the spot was cool and shady, and the water plentiful and sweet. As he looked, the very boldness of the thing began to vex him. Until his gaze, roving over the clutter of barrels, some full, foaming to the brim, caught with a start a few paces up the slope.

He saw a man's feet. Between them a gunstock rested. Deliberately, checking them by force of his will, Duncan let his eyes climb the man's body, tall, moveless, like something grown out of the tree roots he stood among, and draped with pale blue denim overalls and a shirt still paler blue. His hands in a kind of repose that seemed at once too lazy for action and too alert for rest lay one upon the other across the muzzle of the double-barreled shotgun. His face, like his body, was long. Its leanness gave to every feature but his eyes a hungry and mournful prominence. The eyes were deep in his head. They looked sleepy under the drooping lids. Except now and then, the only movement anywhere about his body, he opened them very wide, as though to take in light, and they flashed yellow and closed heavily, as though digesting it. Having once seen that yellow gleam, so like that in a catamount's eyes, Duncan's impression was altered. He knew that under those sleepy lids the eyes glowed as watchfully as if the reposeful body had been crouched upon the roots of that tree. That the man had not been trying to hide was plain enough. He stood on the slope close to the trunk of the tree only by accident. His silence, the direct gaze of his sleepy eyes, boldly claimed the still and all that its ownership involved.

"You're on my land," Duncan said. He tried to make of his tone a challenge that would equal the man's manner.

"I reckon so," the man said. Then his eyes made that flashing gesture, and for a moment deliberately closed in Duncan's face. Never a muscle of his body twitched. "But I ain't seen no fence."

"Get it off. Get it off by tomorrow night."

"It's liable to take longer," the man drawled. "It's a right big still." Now his voice seemed nearly to joke, as though he knew something beyond what was apparent,

and by reason of it could not take seriously Duncan's order.

Duncan's fury was in his mouth, but he locked his teeth against it. He was turning away. "Get it off by tomorrow night."

Almost against his will he stopped again at the man's voice. It was different, as though now the man was in truth baffled by Duncan's behavior, so contradictory to the hidden fact of which he (the man) had been certain.

"What I can't figure is why you'd mind. It ain't bothering you none. It's been here pretty near a year, and you never even knowed it."

"But they'll catch you one of these days. I don't want them to catch you on my land." He knew he had weakened his position by apologizing. But he had done it now. He was not sorry, somehow.

"It ain't like *you* had broke no law. You don't have to know nothing about it." He paused. His voice became suddenly brisker, as though these words expressed that more intimate knowledge which he had held in reserve for the timely moment. "What's the difference to *you* what I get under *them* with?"

It was his emphasis. It supposed a fact deeply personal; and more, supposed it, Duncan felt at once, with the certainty of long familiar knowledge. Yet as far as Duncan knew he had never set eyes on this man, had never even heard of him. This presumption, because it was presumption, and because it was, Duncan saw, strangely accurate, revived his resentment.

"Suppose you told them I let you use my land?"

The man's eyes flashed again, but his voice had the same calm. "Why would I do that? It wouldn't help me none. Anyhow, it'd be my word against your'n. They'd believe you first."

Duncan had lost the argument. He had only his resentment, the desire to show this man that his presumption was in error. And one thing more—that shotgun, resting however idly under the nerveless hands. Quickly he turned. "Tomorrow night," he said without looking at the man. But walking away he felt the emptiness of his gesture. He knew, and he knew the man must know that he knew, the gun was no threat to his back. Even his resentment

seemed a little childish. He stopped. The man, without having moved anything but his head, was watching him as he turned and walked back and stood facing him from the same spot as before. Duncan felt himself swallowing. He tried to conceal it without looking away from the man's eyes.

"Stay on here if you want. But I don't know anything about it."

The yellow eyes widened and slowly blinked. "That's more like," he answered, again with that vexing tone which implied he had been knowing all along what the outcome would be. Then he moved, as though on purpose to relieve Duncan's vexation. He leaned the gun against the tree and stepped down the slope toward the still. He stopped at one of the barrels. He looked down at the whitish froth that floated thick over the mash. Still looking down at it, he said to Duncan:

"Do you like this beer?" He paused. Then he said, "I got some whisky made up, if you'd rather have that."

"I will try a little of the beer," Duncan said. He said it with relief, as though his voice were made of a breath that had been held long and painfully.

The beer had a thick, almost sweetish taste. He hardly noticed its warmth until it spread out in his stomach. He sat on the ground with his back against one of the barrels and drank from a quart jar the man had washed for him in the branch. A few paces away the man crouched on his heels, his profile to Duncan. He drank whisky from a jug. He showed no inclination to speak. So crouched, with his head drooped far downward, his garments seemed to touch only upon the angles and protruding points of his body. He looked awkward, a little off balance. Duncan fancied that if he were to raise his head, elevating the weight of the nose which from the side resembled a blunted hatchet, he would topple onto his back. And this in spite of the heavy jug whose handle, a thick glass ring, looked tight upon the bone of one enormous finger. Duncan drank again from the jar. He threw back his head. Around him the air, as though composed of his own breath, was heavy with the mellow odor of mash. Simply by breathing it long enough, perhaps, one might make oneself drunk. He looked up at the sky. From out of the deep slit

that was the hollow, the vault overhead, cloudless, intense blue, looked as high as heaven. It was as though he gazed up at it from far below the surface of the earth.

"It ain't like I was doing nothing I ain't always done," the man said suddenly. "I was making before I could see over that there barrel." He indicated the one Duncan was leaning against. "My pappy learned me how. Learned me good too. They ain't no better whisky than what I make." He tapped the jug with his fingernail. "Didn't no man care, neither. Then they come along and throwed up a law." He said the last with bitterness, and paused, as though meditating upon it, upon who the "they" was, what "they" looked like.

"They got a law for everything now—hunting, fishing, planting crops. Spew them out like buckshot. A man's got to learn how to duck, nowadays, and roll hisself in a ball and sulk up like a possum. Else he can't make his living. Ever which way he turns he runs up against a government man, or a sheriff, or a game warden." For the first time he looked at Duncan, sharply, as though Duncan were one of those named.

"But let me learn you something: they ain't no man can tell me my business; they ain't no man can tell me how to make my living; and no man can't tell me when and what to shoot and catch out of aer creek. I aim to shoot and fish when I feel like, just like I aim to piss when I feel like. And when a man does me meanness, they ain't no use of him running behind no law. That law ain't agoing to help him none."

With difficulty Duncan had taken in his own unblinking eyes the full anger of the tawny stare, that catamount stare overflowing with hot dancing flecks of light. Every "but" and "only" which he had heard or thought of, and which leaped into his mind was melted instantly into nothing by the intensity of the eyes. They were fixed on him still, awaiting an answer. They said clearly that there was only one answer, that whoever disagreed with him, however slightly, was his enemy. And Duncan did agree, he felt, at least with the spirit of it. From such passionate conviction, scattering inconsequential doubts, there could be no real dissenting. He spoke directly into the eyes.

"That's the way I feel too. A man's not his own any more."

The man dropped his eyes. He took another drink from the jug.

"Do you like that beer?"

"Fine," Duncan said and held the half-filled jar up to the level of his eyes. "Good as I ever drank."

They were silent.

"I used to know everybody around here. Funny I never did know you."

"I ain't been here long. Year or so." He paused. "Liable to be getting about time again . . . can't tell." He stopped decisively, and raised the jug to his lips. It was then that the dog stirred. It gave a throaty groan, just audible, like a growl, and stood up awkwardly. With vacant smoky eyes, it looked about out of the scarred face, fixing on nothing. It was as though the dog were still asleep and only its body roused by some restless dream. After a moment the blunt head, the nose, but not the empty eyes, came to fix on its master.

"Down, Jack," the man murmured, so softly that Duncan was surprised when the dog sank onto its belly as with a blow and laid its big head on the ground between the outstretched paws. The eyes did not close; they were still on the master. But they were the unseeing eyes of sleep.

"What kind of dog is he?" Duncan asked.

"I don't rightly know," the man said disinterestedly. "I found him. Half hound, I reckon."

"Can he hunt?"

The man nodded.

"What'll he run?"

"Coons, foxes, cats, men. It don't make him no difference."

"Doesn't he get mixed up?"

"He don't get mixed up," the man said. "He knows better than that."

He spoke of the dog without warmth or pride, as though its virtues were faults. But more and more his voice came alive in response to Duncan's questions. Then he was talking on his own, telling of hunts he had had. His voice grew louder, yet almost intimate in the way he aimed his words

at Duncan, the way his face became mobile and direct. He told of a cat that had raided his chickens, how he had hated the thing. All night and on into the morning they chased it, he and that dog. It wouldn't come to bay. It was trying to make for a bluff where they never would have got it. But every time they outfigured it, and headed it back. Finally, under the full light of the morning sun they treed it in a lone walnut where it could not get away. The biggest cat he'd ever seen. Shooting was too good for it; he poked it out for the dog. And even that was too good. With his bare hands and a two-inch blade he waded into the snarling whirl of teeth and claws. "I ain't bent them fingers yet," he said, holding up two fingers of his left hand that were knotty and discolored with purplish scars. "But he ain't bent none neither. I cut his throat right through to his neck bone." This last he said with vehemence, as though the cat were some particularly malignant enemy upon which he had taken the vengeance due him. Through all his tales this note of vehemence ran. Always the quarry, of whatever kind, was his enemy. Always he pursued it in the same fit of fury, the kind that makes a man tear his way blindly, unmindful of the shredding garment and the shredding flesh, through thickets of briar and thorn. It was this more than natural heat, this frenzy, that gave to his otherwise simple tales an almost lurid interest. He could not keep still while he talked. His hands worked; his face worked, even contorted at moments, showing through curled-back lips brief clinches of the yellow pirate-like teeth. Sometimes his body jerked, as though subduing an inner violence. So that even the dog, once or twice, raised sleepy half-inquiring eyes. All of it Duncan felt that he understood. He felt that this understanding showed in his face, that the man read in it a reflection of his own spirit, and so let the fever of excitement run on unchecked in his voice. Again Duncan filled the jar. But even through that moment when his back was to the man his attention was fixed on the voice. It did not come to rest until he and the silent Duncan, as with one accord, looked up in surprise at the sky. The sun was setting; the whole sky had a pale orange glow. They stood up.

"Do you mind if I take a jarful of this beer?"

Without speaking the man took the jar. He found a cap and washed it in the branch. Then he brushed back the froth off the same barrel and dipped the jar full and screwed the cap on. He handed it to Duncan.

"I could thank you better if I knew your name," Duncan said.

The man was close to him. The odor of mash was stronger than ever; it seemed to exude from the man's body. Duncan had to raise his head to look into his face. The tawny eyes were wide open. Duncan was suddenly aware of a difference. It was as though the last instinctive barrier of reserve had been dropped, and the eyes, no longer mirrors but clear yellow glass, invited the intimacy of his gaze. It startled Duncan momentarily, like some immodesty in an unexpected place. Yet it touched him too in such a man. Into this emotion the instant of shock vanished. Duncan felt that his own eyes returned the look. When the man said, "It's Aaron McCool," it seemed as if he were revealing to Duncan his most deep and precious secret.

Taking a short cut, Duncan climbed the slope onto the narrow plateau. He was hardly out of breath. He stepped lightly and quick, clashing the leaves with his feet. The jar swung in his hand. He felt a glow in his head, like the afterglow in the west. He reached the precipice that overlooked the valley. Below him his fields lay utterly quiet in a dusky but transparent violet light. Beyond it, over the horizon, hung the last crimson splash left by the vanished sun. He looked for his colt and found it, a little blur on the pasture close to a larger one. He sat down near the edge of the bluff and took a drink from the jar. Perceptibly, shade by shade, the sky grew dimmer. Each long swallow from the jar swelled in him a strange wild sense of exultation. Dusk thickened in the valley, like a rising lake of darkness. The moist night breath of the creek far below him ascended and touched his nostrils. Still he sat and drank, drank until the jar was empty and the last drop had fallen upon his tongue. Then he stood up and with all his might threw the jar. Arching downward, it flashed dimly under the stars, and vanished. He waited until he heard the faint splash from below. Then, unsteadily, he felt his way through the night.

CHAPTER TWO

"What's his name?" she said.

She laid a wary hand on the colt's neck. Unused to this strange body smell, the strange whiteness of this hand, the colt jerked back and momentarily strained against the rope Duncan held. Duncan, standing close beside her, was conscious too of this warm body scent which, though faint, seemed to stifle all the sharp ammoniac smells of the barn; and of the white hand poised in indecision before her breast. Because of these he wanted to edge closer, to touch with his bare elbow the soft arm.

"Easy, little man." He laid his hand gently across the white blaze. "She's not going to hurt you." To the girl he said, "I haven't named him yet. I can't decide. What would you name him?"

"My cousin used to have a pony named Prince. But that wouldn't do for a horse, would it?"

"I don't much believe it would," Duncan laughed.

She pondered a moment. "Do you like Blondy?" She looked at him a little timidly, as though afraid he might laugh at her. "He's got a real blond mane."

"But that's a girl's name, isn't it?" Duncan said seriously.

"I guess it is." She looked away from him. Then,

"Maybe I better let you name him. I never was very good at thinking of names."

"It's harder than it seems. I've been trying ever since he was born."

She filled the silence that followed by petting the colt. Suspiciously, his little ears pert, his eyes walling, the colt suffered her hands on his neck. Duncan watched her hands. They looked as large and strong almost as a man's. But they were strong with that gentle supple strength that he liked to see in a woman. He noticed how her presence gave a changed and disorderly appearance to the interior of the barn. There were hay and cobs and fragments of harness lying about in the hallway. The ceiling was matted with a heavy lacing of cobwebs to which he had paid no attention before. He determined to give the place a cleaning after he had taken her home. How would he get her to come back again? He would have no such excuse next time. No such luck either, probably, as to see her again walking alone when he was passing in his truck. She had not seemed reluctant; she had even seemed timidly glad; at first, anyway. Now and then he caught her eyes looking at him in shy perplexity, as though trying to figure what he could want of her. All his friendliness, all his simplicity of manner had not been able yet to drive that expression from her eyes. And perhaps would not be able to, in the time left him. Then she would carry away with her an awareness only of the differences between them, the differences of years—nearly ten, he guessed—and of station.

"Oh, he'll tear it," she cried suddenly in alarm that was half laughter. She had leaned forward to kiss the shining blaze, and the colt feeling the loose blouse on his nose had seized it in his teeth. Now he held on and tugged with a doglike tenacity, determined not to give up to the pull of her recoiling body. Duncan grabbed for the colt's muzzle. The colt shied, with a sound of ripping cloth. There was a flash of her pale skin and the whiteness of her brassiere. Then her back, slightly rounded over her huddled arms, was toward him and her voice was whining softly, "Oh, oh."

"Wait," Duncan said. In a kind of excitement to which

he had grown unused, he hurried into the feed room. He brought out a clean tow sack. He laid it across her shoulders. She pulled the ends of it down over her breast and clutched them there with her arms. Her face was still bright with the crimson blood.

"He tore it all to pieces . . . my nice blouse."

The colt stood a few paces down the hallway. The little head tossed insolently. From his mouth a fragment of the blue cloth still hung and waved like a banner with his tossing head.

"I'm sorry. I meant to make him let go."

"That's all right. It wasn't your fault." She looked at him less timidly than before.

"Let me give you one of my shirts to wear. You can't go home like that."

She nodded.

Walking down to the house she herself broke the silence.

"He's a pretty colt, just the same."

"Do you think so? He's full of mischief. But the good ones always are."

As they approached the closed door they both became stiffly quiet. It was as though something solemn waited beyond for which they must be ready. She freed one of her hands and smoothed back the brown hair that had straggled onto her forehead. Duncan stepped ahead. He opened the door. On the instant the ringing stillness within struck him powerfully. The pause he felt, turning, he saw in her wide questioning eyes. She hesitated on the threshold. With a sudden sense of depression he said:

"Come on in. There's nobody here." But his voice was lower, colder than he had intended. He saw its reflection in her eyes, like a rebuff. He wanted to make it right, but he felt that at this moment he could not control the tone of cordiality. So he stood quietly, waiting, and looked away from her into the house. She came in with reluctance; she stopped just inside. He did not close the door. Anyway, it was warmer outside than in. Murmuring about the coldness of the house he led her into the parlor. The room was full of sunshine. But she stood clutching the tow sack around her as though for warmth as much as for modesty. He felt a little ashamed of himself. As cordially as he could, he said:

"Have a seat. That's a good chair. I'll get you a shirt."

As he rummaged among the familiar garments in his dresser, he had a sense of doing something unusual, something he did not want to do. He found the shirt, one a little smaller than the rest. He held it in the light. It seemed foreign to him, as though its destiny had begun already the transformation of it into something feminine and exotic. Then he remembered. He put the shirt back and went into Margaret Mary's room.

It was dusty; it smelled of disuse. A picture lay face-down amid bits of broken glass where it had fallen, he did not know when, from the wall. He thought of his sister's fierce and extended battle against disorder, and all this made him sad. The more so when he opened the closet door and saw the bare skeleton hangers. A few clothes were left, hanging together at one end of the closet. At his touch the hangers jangled. He found an old blouse, one Margaret Mary had used to call "tacky" and had worn only when working around the house. He paused with the blouse in his hand. He could see her still in so many different poses, her hair slightly mussed, her mouth set, her hands lean and capable and busy. Those hands that had finished raising him after his mother died, cool on his forehead when he was sick, sewing with peculiar and fascinating rapidity some garment he had torn. He did not wonder that even then hints of that now mature severity were forming about her mouth. All of a sudden he thought that he could not give the blouse away. Then he remembered how long he had kept the girl waiting, and he hurried on with it.

She was standing in the middle of the room where he had left her, hugging the tow sack to her body. With her head cocked a little to one side, like a puppy in impudence or perplexity, she was gazing at the portrait of his great-grandfather. Her attitude was one that seemed to say: "Why so grave and suspicious, old man?" The surprise Duncan felt at it seemed in that same instant to strike her too. She started and turned to him.

"I finally found something," he said quickly. "It used to be my sister's. It's not much, but I guess it'll do."

"It'll do fine," she said.

He closed the door behind him and stood in the shadowy

hall. But there outside, his mind followed her movements in the room, saw her naked flesh, her round breasts swelling the flimsy brassiere. As though he were a boy or an aging lecher, he thought. He felt a wave of disgust. As though these things were a mystery to him, or something unattainable. But still this prurience burned him. Because it was happening here, because here among the inanimate remains, the sightless eyes, the stilled echoes of so many lives and deaths, her nakedness seemed shockingly unfit. It was like loose and merry laughter in the stillness of a burial place. Against it all, her flesh and his desire took on a still more vivid flush of life. Then with a sudden pride and gladness he felt his own blood throbbing. He wanted it to throb. As though at the instance of his will he heard the snap of the latch. The withdrawing door was like the collapse of some familiar barrier, like the bursting shell of a daydream which admits the reality. Sunshine fell past her figure into the hall. She looked at him with an apologetic half-smile.

"It's a little tight."

He felt no wince of recollection at the familiar blouse. In fact, it was not familiar any longer. On her it did not hang emptily, as though veiling the body underneath. Her breast, her full waist, pulled the blouse close against her skin, and brought the look of apology into her face. But the look was there only briefly, until after she had glanced into his eyes. A new expression appeared. She blushed, and looked down. Quickly Duncan turned his head, wondering how his own face had looked. After a pause, he said:

"Do you like my house?"

"It's nice. You got a lot of pretty things."

"They're awful old," Duncan said.

"That's all right. Sometimes the old ones are the prettiest ones."

She walked nearer and gazed up at the portrait. Duncan hoped she would stand a long time like that, in profile, with her head tilted, so that he could look at her.

"That's my great-grandfather," he said abstractedly. "He built this house."

"Doesn't he sort of give you goose pimples? I kept feel-

ing like he was watching me the whole time I was putting on this blouse."

"You get used to him," Duncan laughed. He was just aware how her presence prevailed over all the prominent and familiar features of the room, so that the furnishings lost their status as inhabitants, and became only what they were, things to be used and admired by people in the room.

She turned away rather dubiously from the picture.

"Just the same, ain't—isn't it sort of scary back up here in this big house, all by yourself?"

"No, not any more. People can get used to anything."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I don't know. I never saw one."

"I don't guess I do either," she said. "But my family sure do; especially Mama." She paused to make certain of the inquiry in Duncan's face. "Because of what happened winter before last." She looked at him with the open confidence and animation that said she was sure of his keenest interest. "My brother Ed was off in Nashville working. It was just about daylight, just so you could see good, and kind of misting rain. Mama went out back to the smokehouse to get some meat. She said she just come out with a jowl in her hand and she was fastening the door when something made her look around. It was a woman coming around the house, kind of young and pretty and all dressed up in a white dress. Mama says she could see her just as plain. Said she looked kind of unhappy. She acted like she didn't even see Mama; just walked right on in between her and the house just pretty as you please in her high-heel shoes, like she was on a sidewalk instead of that old mud in our back yard. Mama said she wouldn't of had to raise her voice to speak to her, but she was too scared to move. Then the woman walked right on around the house out of sight. Mama said after she got her nerve up she went around too and looked. But she didn't see a soul. Her face was just as white when she got in the house. Then, just two days later, Ed got killed in a car wreck, him and a woman. She was married, and he was running away with her. Their pictures were in the newspaper. Mama saw them and said that was the same woman, she'd know her anywhere."

The girl stopped. Her eyes were bright and moist, as though she were experiencing not only triumph at the strangeness of the tale, and its reception, but also the awe with which the event itself had impressed her. Duncan was moved by the tale and the teller alike. Throughout, he watched her speaking eyes, how they glistened, like those of a child who frightens himself by his own imaginings. And the full lips where now there was no trace of a pout, which hung in parted expectation of his response.

"That is strange," he said; "really strange." But already he felt the doubts rising, as they always did at such things, because these things had always some natural explanation. Wanting to and yet unable to believe it really, from long habit he began to press her. In the beginning her answers were firm. No, her mother never imagined things; she wasn't that kind; she never had before. And there weren't any footprints. Nobody could walk through all that mud without leaving footprints. But he noticed that with his continued probing her answers became more doubtful. Her doubt arose not from the questions themselves, for he could not explain the thing away. It arose from his manner toward the thing, his skepticism, which shamed her gullible acceptance of mere appearances. Then he was sorry. Now it was he who was filling the role he despised, which roots out innocent conviction, and in its place has nothing to offer except intelligent doubt.

"I'm not saying it was really a ghost," she said. "But Mama sure thinks it was. They all do."

"Maybe it was. A lot of things happen that can't be explained. People's doubting them doesn't keep them from being true."

She looked at him as though uncertain nevertheless which she should believe. After a moment she stood up suddenly.

"I'll bet it's late."

"Not very," he said. He thought how the room would look without her.

Her eyes found the big clock.

"Oh, it's not running, is it? Won't it work?"

"It'll work. I just never bother to wind it."

"Let me," she said. "I love these big old clocks."

The vibrant rasping of the clock's insides sounded with

every twist of the heavy key. It seemed to be this as much as the slight ripple each of her motions made in the skirt behind her thighs which suddenly was teasing his passion. The noise was like pain almost; its resonance carried silently in the flow of his blood to the most distant nerves of his body. He watched her fix the hands at five o'clock and set the pendulum swinging and turn to him with pert eyes.

"Now you'll know what time it is."

"But you only guessed."

"I'll bet it's pretty near right, though."

They went out through the hall that was darker than ever now. They crossed the threshold into a world ablush with the bright quietness of the evening sun. On top of the hill opposite the house one dead and barren chestnut tree outreached all the others. On the highest of its shattered branches a crow sat alone and very still against the sky. As though it had been waiting for him to come out. Momentarily his conviction that Aunt Virgy wanted to see him amounted to certainty. He determined not to go; not soon, anyway.

The hard frosts came, and they gathered corn. Down the long bottom and back and down again they gathered in clear brittle weather which nevertheless grew so warm toward one o'clock that they worked in their shirt sleeves through the greater part of the afternoon. The mules, as though in exhaustion after the season's work, and already falling into a long winter's sleep, dozed at every halt of the wagon. Once the heap of corn had begun to mount in the bed, and the wheels to cut deeper into the earth, the wagon rolled silently through the rattling corn. Their hands with a deft twisting motion snatched the ears from the stalks. From three sides, like clumsy leaping fish, the ears arched over onto the pile. Wesley took the down-row. He hummed while he worked, something low and richly sad, something for which there were neither words nor melody but which yet was the perfect expression of some inchoate or uncreated thought. Despite its lack of melody, of form, it was old familiar music to them all; because it was the unthought utterance of his heart, and not his only but the great rich heart of his race. Down the long rows

they worked in this music, talking little. Sometimes through moments at a stretch Logan would gently nod his head, as though really there were words and melody at a key to which Duncan's ears were not attuned. But Duncan felt the beauty of it. And he had flashes of understanding too, earned from his years of intimacy with Negro hearts that had been close to him. There was the snapping of shuck and stem, the feel of the weighty ears in their hands, the thud of corn falling onto the heap. They were not conscious of working then; they were only conscious of being, and of their bodies acting out what that being inspired in them. Once they all stopped and looked up at the shrill "kree kree" of a hawk low overhead. It soared without a movement on the steady air, on the pale soft down of its wings and underbelly. It passed over them, and suddenly swooped low to the ground. Then it paused, hung in the air with beating wings. It dropped to the earth. They saw the flashing of gray-brown feathers among the corn, and they saw the hawk rise with something small gripped in its claws and fly off toward the horizon.

They did not speak; they gathered the ears with a trance-like rapidity of motion that never varied. But now their manner had somehow undergone an increase of intensity. They might have been celebrants of some ritual approaching the moment of ultimate communion. Logan's mumbling to the mules and the brief forward movements of the wagon were not interruptions; they were like familiar transitions in a ceremonial order. Until these moments passed and again in their faces appeared that calm of thought no more than half articulate. In silence they gathered on. The sunlight glanced from the rusty top blades of the corn, and the hill's shadow with its wintry air slipped toward them across the bottom.

He built a great fire that night in the parlor. He fed it with seasoned logs that he had picked from the pile until the fire was a torrent of flame pouring into the chimney. Halfway across the room he felt a drawing heat on his face. In the hall he lit a lamp; and across in the bedroom that had been his father's, was his own now, he lit another and set it upon the dresser. As he reached to turn up the wick he saw in the mirror his face washed in a glow of yellow light and his eyes like dark blue settings for little points

of fire. He turned the wick, and the increase of light smothered the reflections in his eyes. But the expectancy was there still. He walked out into the hall and into the parlor again. It seemed that surely all this heat and light must generate some merriment beyond itself. Then it occurred to him that he must help; or else this mood, as always with moods of lightness, would die of its own fragility.

He found his guitar upstairs. The strings were intact. They did not break when he drew them taut. While he was tuning it he picked the strings so gently that the truth of the sounds was barely audible even to himself. Something on the air seemed too delicate to withstand even the least discordance. With scrupulous care he fingered out many silent notes until he began to feel them again. Hesitantly he began to play. The tune was "Red River Valley," an easy one, and his fingers gained confidence with every bar. Now the music seemed natural enough in the room. He even wished for other ears than his own to hear, for it seemed to him as his fingers grew more practiced that his own music was a near match for any he had ever heard. As good almost as that of his grandfather, he imagined, who used to snatch the guitar from Duncan's hand and play as Duncan believed no one else in the world could do. When the mood was on him the old man could play like the devil's own fiddler. He buried his whiskered chin in his neck until his face looked bloated and scarlet. He said he did not breathe while he played, at least while he played the fast ones. Duncan remembered the flying music of "Soldier's Joy" and "The Woman with the Red Dress On." He tried to imitate the old man, but his conception moved too fast for his awkwardness. He fell back into slower tunes, tunes he had not thought of in years but which followed one another without pause through his mind. Then he was softly singing. And then louder, at his natural pitch, "Red Wing" and "The Roving Gambler" and "Lilly Dale," without choice, as they came to him. Until his fingers burned and his body felt the chill that had moved in behind the withdrawing ring of heat.

He got up from the sofa and with a pillow stretched out in front of the hearth. He had a warm sense of well-being, like a dog indoors. There were definite things he wanted to think about. But they lay indolently in his mind; to deal

with them seemed scarcely worth the trouble. A name for the colt was one. Or had he named it? No, he had not. So it would be King o' Chiefs, because the colt's mother was out of a Chief, because it had a pleasant sound, and because he was tired of puzzling about it. That was behind him now, decided, as good a name as any. But now there was Nettie—he had come to think of her by name. Suddenly he felt that there was no problem, that where he had expected to find perplexity he found only a vague and tranquil sense of anticipation. He knew he would go to see her soon, however it might look. . . . Then into his mind came other things too, weightless things, seen as at a hazy distance in disconnected glimpses: the face of his former wife, that of a man he had worked for, Garner's face—equally unreal; there was a building, tall and vivid, that he could not remember having seen; a man, both very familiar and strange, in characteristic posture; an office with many desks and much scattered paper, and empty but for one still man, he himself, who sat gazing vacantly out of a window. All of these were like illusions which once examined would be seen to have no basis in his actual life. Then these too were gone. There was only his own body lying in warmth next to the hearth, a warmth intensified by drafts of air that at intervals pricked his flesh. And by something else—the sense that these moments would last only as long as his mother delayed in calling him up to bed.

This time the final coming of winter, heralded by a long rain which turned at last to sleet, did not depress him. It seemed that this time all these shades of gray blended well enough with the mood of tranquillity which had come over him so suddenly, so surprisingly. How many times had he thought what a curse was this busy mind of his, like a shuttle running without his consent, weaving fragments into patterns which at last came to look each like all the others. Now, in a sense, it seemed to have fallen idle. Not that his will had checked it consciously. It was as if his mind had been rid of a fever, and now, convalescing, found satisfaction in things immediate and unrelated. But was it really so sudden? Had it not been coming upon him for weeks, from an accumulation of causes, and only reached its maturity that night when he lay by the fire? At any rate he felt that

his life had been blessed by a new quality, one which would endure. And yet, for all this, out of an uneasiness lest what had come so naturally might as naturally depart, he went a little guardedly. He was like a man who goes about with his eyes to the ground and tells himself that what he cannot see in the distance need not exist for him.

The mare died. She was only a few days about it. They all knew instantly she quit eating what the trouble was and put the colt on cow's milk. Lying dead in the stall her body was a shrunken and pitiful sight. It saddened Duncan to think back to when this collapsed and barely covered skeleton had been clothed with the full-fleshed and proud grace of her youth.

"She ought to of died a time ago, but her business weren't through here." Gently Logan raised her head and passed the rope under her neck. "She done more than she were able. That little fellow had him a mammy to be proud on."

When they dragged the mare away Duncan stayed to feed the colt. The colt had taken to the bottle all right, but he was restless away from his mother. Until the very last she nickered weakly to him from her stall. The colt would answer with shrill screams and soft quivering snorts, and plunge furiously from wall to wall. Once he even got his front feet over the top of the door. Now, as if sensitive to what was happening out there, he would not notice the the bottle Duncan held out. He tried to get to the door. Firmly Duncan planted his feet and with the strength of his arm under the straining neck held the colt back. He wheeled and reared and whined piercingly. He was a long time growing quiet. He would take a few pulls from the bottle. Then his head would go up, and his ears, and his breath would come quick and irregular. Duncan talked to the colt in the low singsong he always used with him:

"Poor little man, got no mammy; poor little Chief, I'm your new mammy."

In a way he was glad for this, for the new intimacy it had afforded them. The colt was old enough now to make it through all right. But it was not many days before he began to feel disappointment at the colt's response. Not at the response of its health; the change of milk seemed to make no difference. It was the colt's behavior toward him

which left him unsatisfied. Not always. For there were times when the colt was as affectionate as a dog. Then he would nicker when Duncan approached the stall, and strain his neck to look out over the door with an expression of walleied eagerness. With his nose he would nudge Duncan's body, nip at his belt or his shirt. When with a surge of feeling Duncan bent over and placed his cheek against the colt's, whispering to him, he felt, heard, the quick breath warmly tickling and loud upon his ear and neck.

But there were the other times. He could recognize them as soon as he got near to the door; there was no calculating them in advance. The colt would be standing in the farthest dark corner of the stall. If he looked at Duncan then it was with a glance; and out of the shadows the little glass eye flashed as cold as quicksilver. Several times he had kicked at Duncan. Once he had connected hard with Duncan's shin. He stayed in the corner sulling, or turned away from Duncan threatening him with the quivering and hard-muscled rump. Then began a painful period of coaxing, with Duncan patient and gentle, and the colt unresponsive, at moments even vicious. It usually ended in only half-success. The colt would take the bottle, but suspiciously; it shied away at even the most deliberate approach of Duncan's hand. There were times when Duncan grew enraged at its fickle temper, its gratuitous, its childlike displays of spitefulness. But always he checked himself in time. He knew that only through a firm gentleness could such a colt be conquered without damage to his spirit. Or rather, he reckoned this to be so; even *reckoned* it with caution. Somehow, he felt, the colt was more than normally singular. So much so that none of Duncan's accumulated lore seemed to fit his case, as he would have had a right to anticipate. What he knew really that he must do was wait with patience, and watch. It was just this necessity, this sense of never quite being sure, which added to his affection for the colt a deeper almost intellectual interest. It was, he thought, like the courtship of a woman at once handsome and capricious and strange.

Just once a week, on Saturday nights, he saw Nettie. He could have managed it more often. But this suited him. It was the obvious time, and the interval gave an appearance of casualness which left his mind untroubled by thoughts

about the future. For of this he preferred not to think even with the knowledge that such a relationship could not be more than temporary. When he thought in this way at all it was to consider how well the arrangement satisfied him. It gave point to his week, a certain order, and a rhythm which heightened as Saturday approached. It reminded him of the days of his early manhood when the weeks passed in just such a way as this. And now, just as then, he had dreams which left him inflamed through the whole day following. It was the same kind of passion too, he thought; the kind which springs from the loins instead of the brain, which requires for its fulfillment not the uses that ingenuity invents but only the naked female body. But he had made no advances to her. In his imagination he had already known the sudden flash of alarm, of helplessness in her eyes, the stiffening of her body at his touch. He feared this; feared it the more because of the deference with which she treated him, which had not vanished through all the weeks of their friendship, had only diminished as though to a fixed degree and there remained as a thing seemingly permanent between them. He wanted it to remain. It was like a safeguard—to something in himself, as well as to her. It prevented a deeper kind of communion between them, which he did not desire; yet it did not interfere with the pleasure he took in her company. He thought it delicate in her to preserve this intangible thing between them which she might have ignored so easily. Unless it was his own doing, and her attitude was shaped in spite of herself by the manner which unconsciously he used with her.

But there were times when it seemed certainly to be, in part at least, a result of her own conscious effort. He noticed with what care she shielded him from her family. Not because she was ashamed of them, he had decided; at least not primarily on account of this. Because on that first Saturday night she had made no such effort. Instead she had let him sit a painful length of time concealing his discomfort. He sat close beside the one bright-burning lamp, in a stuffed chair through which he could feel the coils. The room was small, the walls of cracked and peeling plaster that showed signs of having been papered once. There were a big calendar and one or two meaningless pictures hanging. Mr. Roundtree sat on the sofa. His face

was lit up by the fire and by the whisky Duncan had smelled when he shook the leathery but ungripping hand. Mr. Roundtree talked with unnatural animation. His grammar was only the worse for his attention to it. He kept stirring on the sofa, crossing and uncrossing his bony denim-clad legs. At intervals between sentences dry bursts of air, like snickers, escaped from his nostrils. His talk was a long eulogy of Duncan's father, sprinkled with recollections of Duncan's own youth. Nothing was required of Duncan except an appearance of attention; for this Mr. Roundtree's eyes were watchful. Like a timid hostess, Mrs. Roundtree peered in now and again from the kitchen where she had retired after a mumbled greeting to Duncan. Nettie sat silent watching him from across the area of brightest light. He could not see her eyes, they were hid under shadows; but she seemed to be studying him with an objectiveness he would not have expected. Though not unkindly, he thought. But for a long time she made no move to relieve him, did not even glance at her father. Finally she stood up all of a sudden and waited, gracefully, he thought, in her shadowy corner for the pause that was bound to come. When it did come she said to him: "There's an awful good picture on at Brady. We better go if we mean to get there in time."

Afterward she made no comment upon it. But to his satisfaction the scene was never repeated. From then on she met him at the door with a brusque hurried air that forestalled any attempt of her father to detain them. She was so successful that even when her brothers were there he scarcely got a glimpse of them.

It was hard to talk in the cab of the truck because of the racket the engine made. Yet in a way he liked this best of all, just riding in the cold raining and sleeting winter darkness with her on the leather seat beside him. There were snatches of talk when they had to lean near to one another in order to be heard without shouting. Coming as they did at intervals, these too were pleasant; each time it was like bending close to some lightless source of warmth. Withdrawing into the cold again, he had a memory of it only less vivid than the actual sensation on his face had been. After the first few Saturday nights he brought a blanket to keep the cold drafts off her legs. Sometimes when the

weather was extreme he would pull the end of the blanket over his own legs also. Then he would ride along in the night with the especially intimate feeling that they were sharing the warmth of each other's bodies.

Most often they would go to the picture show, and then to a little roadside restaurant on the Nashville highway. Here, even on the big night of the week it was usually quiet. They added but little to the hum of voices, for they talked softly, and about the simplest things, as though the far-reaching ones were something to be avoided between them. But that time of talking, of soaking up heat from the guttering stove, of tasting the barbecue, and the beer, which she refused, seemed to him the richest of all the week.

There was another place where they went a few times. He knew she did not like to go, but she objected so briefly and so mildly that his desire always overrode her. He thought it perverse in himself, even on these few occasions; for the pleasure he took in it was not what he felt he wanted most, was not something shared with her. The place was quite different; a honky-tonk called Benny's Place which they entered a little furtively. Here there was always a crowd, a tough one, and noise and dancing and now and then a fight. A big cardboard on which was printed in bold red letters LET FREEDOM REIGN and signed "Benny Krantz" always amused him, because Benny was now serving time for blatantly and unrepentantly continuing to sell bootleg whisky over the counter. In his absence it continued to be sold, but now with the most necessary precautions. By eleven o'clock it had taken its toll in the crowd. The noise grew louder, almost drowning the noise of the tiny band. The dancing grew wild. The revolving circles lost their order entirely at moments, and sometimes in the middle of a figure fists began to fly. Then the fists disappeared in a knot of male bodies suddenly converged and the combatants were dragged cursing, drunk with whisky and rage, out of the building. The sounds of the fighting outside could still be heard. Then in the gentle tone that always conveyed her dissenting opinions, Nettie would ask if he did not think they should leave. He would put her off, pleading the safety afforded them by the obscure corner they always occupied.

This was the hour he liked most. The music, the vio-

lence, the looseness were a fierce excitement to him. The music especially, like the understratum in which the rest had root, which he did not so much hear as feel in the movement of his blood. There were now no interruptions by popular tunes which earlier had equaled the old ones in number. Caught up in the fervor, themselves half drunk, the musicians played what in their hearts they knew. They played with a savage energy, as though determined before the evening was out to exhaust in music the last spark of what they felt. The sound of fiddle and guitar and bass swelled upward and then, like something drowning, subsided beneath the clubbing of many feet and voices raised in laughter and shouts and argument. The intervals between tunes were leaps over the shortest breathing spaces, were hardly to be noticed; the more so because the rhythm of the music seemed to be kept alive somehow in the pulsing life of the crowd. He half welcomed some incident which without his will might draw him into that life; into the circles of dancers, the hard handgrips of the sluttish women; or even into the greater violence of a fight. But there was never any incident. Only once, in fact, did he find any cause for anger. This was when he raised his head and saw Dicky Jordan across the room gazing at them with an expression of insolent amusement. As though he did not notice Duncan's eyes, Jordan continued for a moment to look at them before he tossed his head and raised a glass to his lips. To this sort of thing there was no possible response. Anyway there beside him at the little corner table sat Nettie with just a suggestion of uneasiness in her face. He knew that at any irregularity of his the look was ready to break into one of alarm. He always felt a little mean while he kept her there. He never did for more than an hour or two. Afterward she always hinted at her dislike of the place. Each time he answered that they would not go there any more, thinking with regret that of all the places in the area this one was least suitable for a girl like her. But then he would think of the music, how it moved him, how only there, on that one night, could he count on finding music like that.

Several times that winter he visited Aaron McCool. When he did not find him at the still he found him at his house, or rather his shack, which sat far back up on the

ridge at the edge of a pine thicket. The place was in a state of miserable disrepair. The roof sagged dangerously, and where it had extended over what used to be a porch, had collapsed onto the rotten splintered floor boards. Except in front of the door Aaron had not bothered to clear the rubble away. In places the plaster had fallen from between the logs so that inside one could feel breaths from the wind, and now and then see a chicken pecking in the yard. Yet when indoors Aaron sat without shirt or shoes in all kinds of weather, relying only on heat from the small wood stove. The muscles of his chest and shoulders, as knotty and protrusive as if strained in perpetual cramps, never flinched at any gust of wind. Sometimes while he talked he rested one or both of his bare feet on the sleeping body of the dog. If the dog even noticed it he gave no sign. Duncan observed that the animal was lean and fat by turns. Probably most of its living came from the mash at the still, where at times there would be plenty, and again none at all.

All of Aaron's talk, his many tales, still left his past as obscure as though he had sprung out of the earth a full-grown man already not young any more. There was not a word about where he had come from, or why. Yet he did not appear evasive; he did not seem to be hindered by a concern to hide anything. His tales were liberally extracted from the past; the naked events, carrying with them only a faint, a kind of smoldering aura from the life that was their context. They were full of wild hunts, of conflicts, of flights and narrow scrapes. And what the tales lost through omissions by the teller was more than made up by the fiercely abundant energy with which he told them. Duncan guessed that many of them were the purest fabrications; or things that had happened to someone else. But he guessed too, with confidence, they all had basis in that actual life about which he knew only, as it were, that the pulse beat was as rapid as that of an animal. The fact of his own ignorance piqued Duncan a little, made him feel at a disadvantage; especially in light of the knowledge about him and about his past which at intervals Aaron revealed. Yet it did not disturb the feeling of peculiar intimacy that had grown up between them, nor the sense of kinship he felt with Aaron. A strange kinship, he

thought; because of the outward differences between them. But even stranger because of their inner differences. He sensed in Aaron qualities he abhorred; especially a brutality which manifested itself not only in his talk, but even in his treatment of the old dog grown so much scarred in his service. And which manifested itself more subtly at times in the way he would all at once be looking at Duncan, with keenest scrutiny, as though trying to study out exactly just what elements composed him. Then the look would be gone and forgotten amid the talk and the drinks of whisky that followed. Until afterward when he would think about it and feel for Aaron, for the life he led, short-lived flashes of repugnance.

He never mentioned his friendship with Aaron, any more than he did his friendship with Nettie. But about the latter Logan knew and was silently disapproving. All winter he was a little sullen with Duncan, though he never once brought up the matter, scarcely even hinted at it. But about Duncan's friendship with Aaron, Logan knew nothing. In fact, by casual questions, Duncan learned that he knew next to nothing about the man himself. He had never seen him. He knew only by hearsay that the man lived someplace back up on the ridge, that nobody knew where he came from, that he was regarded with a good deal of suspicion. Some said he made whisky, and the revenue men got onto it; but they never found a trace. Still, people said, he had to make whisky, because he didn't do nothing else. Duncan was surprised at the vagueness and the small quantity of Logan's information; for he knew Logan probably had all that was available. Yet Aaron had been in the community for a year and a half or more.

The mid-March days promised spring. He felt that now he could look back on the winter. It had been a not unhappy one; he would settle for all his winters being as good as this one past. Chief had come through beautifully. He was growing fast. He had not had a moment's sickness, if he did disturb Duncan sometimes by his incalculable disposition, his spasmodic tendency toward viciousness. But that would probably improve once he could run free and graze the fresh spring grass. With the good weather ahead Duncan felt more secure in his happiness. Soon he must go and see Aunt Virgy again. He had neglected her

all winter, consciously. Once she had even sent him word to come. Though he was sorry to treat her so, he had stayed away. Strangely, he was a little afraid of her at times. Or at least uneasy lest she might interfere by something she said with this happiness which he felt to be so delicate. But now he could go and make up to her for his neglect.

However, spring had not come. It turned bitterly cold all of a sudden and ended in a heavy snowfall. The snow was already ankle deep when he came out that morning, and it continued, this white falling silence, until noon. It would be short-lived, he thought; the last stroke of winter. And it would enrich the earth. Besides, he liked the strange soundlessness of the world that snow created. So that he was startled when a voice hailed him as he came out of his house after dinner. It was Nettie. She had just crossed the footbridge, was coming toward him. She dragged a small sled behind her. Her head was covered with a blue kerchief and her body with trousers and a khaki sweater sizes too large.

"Hi," she said. "Let's go coasting. It's such a good snow."

He was a little taken aback by the unexpectedness of her appearance. And by her tone, direct and confident and merry, like that of a child inviting his friend. For a moment he was irritated. But only for a moment. Her face was flushed with the cold; her eyes were fixed on him with the bright and moist expression of laughter. Between her expectant lips her teeth showed as white as if mirroring the color of the earth. Her manner, the poised and ready gesture with which she held the sled rope out from her body, bespoke an occasion sprung of itself out of the beautiful snow. Because of this she had come; to this the tone of her voice, like her nature, had only responded.

They climbed the high hill. They looked down on the shrunken house, the invisible roof, the bare and gray-black walls. The big elm trees were dwarfs. They crowded onto the sled, he behind, steering with his feet, encircling her with his arms. They dropped from the hill. It was like the swift and shrieking dive of a hawk through a white cloud. The wind burned. Her scream, shrill as a child's, was the wake their bodies left in the lead-gray air. He held her

the tighter to his body as they gathered speed. Her grip on his hands was stronger than a woman's. Then came the disappointment of relaxing speed and wind and muscles. Across his yard they coasted in silence, their hearts like their bodies losing momentum, slowing to rest and gentle breathing. They stopped just short of his front door. He let his arms drop from around her, and she sprang quickly to her feet.

"Oh, let's go again."

Many times they climbed and swooped down from the hill. More than once in mid-flight they overturned and rolled like half-stuffed bundles raising little storms of spray from the loose snow. They got up laughing. The time she lost her kerchief he helped her brush the snow out of her hair. Her face was as flushed as if her blood were swelling into the pores. Her lips were a deeper bluish red. But she would not quit, not until the shivering of her body approached violence. Then they went into the house.

He started the fire with kerosene. It boomed up into the chimney. For that moment the features of the room, the straight-backed chairs, the desk, the portrait over the mantel, stood out of the dimness as in a sustained flash of lightning; then, as the flames settled onto the logs, receded again into the general gloom. She sat on the floor beside the hearth, unsweated, in her man's cotton work shirt. She shivered just a little. She drew closer to the fire. The ruddiness that the cold had put into her face was kept intact by the heat. Which added something else, something faintly golden in the normally clear-brown irises of her eyes. The look of it fascinated him. She saw him gazing, and smiled.

"Are you warm now?" he asked. "Could I get you a coat?"

In answer she only continued the smile. Or wasn't it a different smile, a knowledgeable one with a significance hidden from him? Or was it the gleam of some quiet inner laughter at his expense? Afterward he thought that this was what had started it. She had leaned back against the chair then, and stretched, with her elbows raised high, swelling her breast upward, still smiling through the half-yawn she quickly tried to hide. It was not only his passion, though hotly tempted, which made him act then.

Somehow the smile affected him like a challenge. It made him not mindful any more of the look he had used to imagine and to fear in her eyes. Though it came, just as he had imagined it. He closed his eyes when he kissed her. He did not look into her face again. Her gradual surrender was to his hands, resisted only timidly, which wandered over her breast and belly and thighs; to his lips, and to the pressure of his cheek and body. Not to his eyes. Not to his voice. In fact, it had been just this silence, hers as well as his, which had given to his recollection of the thing the shape of brutality. Like the intercourse of animals, he thought. But which yet had quickened his passion only the more; quickened it still in recollection. He thought that if just once she had protested aloud, had resisted him on the higher level of speech, this might have stopped it. The resistance had been there, mutely. In body she did respond at the last, but only when beyond that final moment in which escape was still possible. Until then, even after she had ceased her outward and feeble defense, her protest continued inwardly, manifested by the woodenness of her body, her slight shudder as from the cold at the first touch of his nakedness on hers. Throughout he had been aware that in spirit she did not submit; not until the last, anyway, under compulsion of the flesh. It was because of this knowledge that he had avoided her eyes with such constancy. Yet this had not rebuked his desire; had rather inflamed it more by the fact that her protest found expression in a palpable, if halfhearted bodily resistance.

Afterward, covering her nakedness, she had sat gazing into the fire. The slight pout natural to her lips was more emphatic. She did not say anything, nor did he. His glances caught no sign of tears in her eyes, nor of anything except solemn meditation of the fire. What he tried to say a few minutes later stuck without a sound in his throat. Walking home, their silence, broken by occasional monosyllables, seemed just suited to the soundless and empty world of snow and cold gray light. At her yard gate he was going to say something. For the first time since it had happened she looked directly at him, and now with a difference, though not quite definable, about which there could be no question. Again he failed. He succeeded only in mention-

ing the coming Saturday night. She nodded her agreement as she turned away.

Later, that same parlor with the fire almost dead now seemed different to him. It looked the way a familiar room will look when one returns to it at some odd hour after an unusual and broken day. Momentarily he let his mind be taken up with this difference. But very soon he saw the thing enacted all over again. He said to himself it was there that it had happened, there just in front of the hearth. Suddenly it occurred to him that there might be blood. He went to the hearth and looked. He saw no sign on the floor, or on the little rug. With his foot he slid the rug back. For a moment he could see nothing. Then, he made out a large and roughly oval stain, very dim and ancient, only darker than the wood out of which the moist air had brought it. He remembered. He stood and contemplated it.

CHAPTER THREE

He married her in April. He had asked her on a Monday afternoon. The following Saturday they were married in Nashville. It had been no whim of his. Every moment of the three-week interval preceding had been troubled with the ebb and flow of the problem in his mind. His very sleep was agitated. The arguments he brought against it were continually in and out of balance with his desire and his sense of obligation. Against his desire he was watchful. He strove to exclude it, to keep cool the justice of his thinking. But it crept in unnoticed, and added its weight to the argument. Then he would force it out, and begin all over again. It was his obligation only that must have real weight in his conclusion. Not his obligation to make an honest woman of her, not principally that. More keen was his feeling of guilt toward himself, as though he were the one who was violated. Not guilt because of his unchastity but because the act was a violation of what was established, understood; and worse, upon the body of a girl who certainly loved him, a violation of that which gave the act its only human distinction. If just there had been words, gentleness, whether felt and meant or not; this would have made it better. Instead there was silence and something approaching force; an action at once calculating

and hot against resistance whose timidity resulted from baffled respect and love. But he could make it up—to himself, and to her. There would be opportunity for gentleness then; there would be the sanction which marriage gives even to a brutal act.

So many times he weighed this argument against the others. But on the three dates left them he tried to pretend that nothing was different. He could tell that she was trying too. But it was all changed; it would never be again as it was before. He thought that perhaps this sense of loss was the thing which finally had decided him; this and his desire for her which after all had entered into his decision. But not importantly, he had thought at the time. It was only after his marriage that he began to think he had underestimated its influence. Then, he looked at his decision in a little different light, in the first flush of the sexual pleasure he took in her. It was more even than he had expected. It was as if all the accumulated hungers of these past years had come to a head in this one craving. He recollected the first month of his previous marriage, before the trouble had begun; their pleasures, at least those connected with sex, seemed shadowy by comparison. Nor did he remember approaching his wife so often, or upon such sudden impulse. He wondered if Nettie thought, too often. She never showed displeasure. She never failed to comply unhesitatingly. If her response was not quite so passionate as he had hoped, this was to be expected at such an early date. Anyway, it was perhaps his own fault, in part. He remembered his argument of the time preceding their marriage, his resolve. But that kind of gentleness, the caresses, especially the words, came hard to him. He grew impatient at the delay involved. The phrases sounded banal on his lips; they troubled him by the implicit questions they asked. Each one that he uttered left him with a feeling of trivial dishonor. There were times when he could not bring himself to speak them at all. At other times he would forget. Then the act would be performed in that silence for which he had so sharply condemned himself before.

But this was weather that brought even to desolate minds a sense of richness. The valley was full of spring. Blooming locust and honeysuckle weighted the air at

dusk. All night the owls and whippoorwills kept the valley alive with their voices. There was plenty of work for him on the farm. And when he passed the house during the day the doors and windows stood open and clothes hung in the yard. He liked to think of the house breathing with life again, echoing with the ticking clock, busy footsteps, the scraping of a broom, the clash of pans and dishes. At first he never failed to receive a mild stroke of surprise somewhere in the back of his mind when he entered and realized it was Nettie who was in the house. Her presence there, he felt, made more than the apparent difference. There was a new spirit in the house, a dominant one entirely unfamiliar. And this in spite of the fact that during those first weeks she had not so much as moved a stick of furniture out of its place. It was later that she first asked him, apologetically, if he would mind her moving into the parlor a stuffed chair that had long been upstairs. She would use it to sew in. And it would make the room look more comfortable. He did not like the idea; he thought the chair not suited, that it would crowd the room. But he concealed his objection. So that it came to stand in place of one of the straight-backed chairs which had been moved into the corner. She made no other such request. But she wanted to; he had seen her regarding the portrait over the mantel. Once or twice she had remarked on its severity. It was he himself who finally brought it up. Though he did it regretfully, he helped her move the portrait to a place out in the hall. He did it on an impulse. Not an impulse sprung from any pure kindness or even desire he felt for her. It was a kind of penance. It stood in lieu of that which he felt to be lacking in himself; that emptiness which, he had begun to feel, was or might become a silent and increasing mockery of his marriage. Actually, moving the portrait was a little thing. Yet not so little. He was surprised how hard it was getting used to the change. For some time whenever he entered the parlor he felt in the absence of the portrait a brief sense of outrage. As long as he stayed in the room he felt unsettled, as by some disorder or dislocation that must be corrected at once. But gradually he began to get accustomed to the difference.

It was these changes, perhaps, along with use, which increased Nettie's confidence. She did not hesitate any more

to make other changes about the house; small ones, invariably, but ones which he noticed. Another result was her disclosure of what in her timidity she had been concealing through the greater part of the two months they had been married. She was pregnant. She told him one night after supper, very suddenly, as he was getting up from the table. There was no gladness in her face, only a blank watchfulness. The expression that followed was a reflection of his own; it was one of half-incredulous surprise, as though her own words had caught her unawares.

"How could you be? We were careful."

She looked down at her hands in her lap. He watched her lips, very distinct and full in the lamplight.

"It happened that first time."

"Before we were married?"

She nodded.

"You should have told me sooner."

"I didn't know . . ." She paused. "I didn't know whether you wanted a baby or not." For a moment she continued to look down. Then, slowly, she raised her eyes to his.

"Sure I do," he said. "It just surprised me. I hadn't thought about it."

"It'll come too soon."

"Well, then, let it. It doesn't matter."

He did not quite know how to take the news. At first it seemed unreal, like a conclusion reached by logic beyond the grasp of the imagination. Only by degrees did it take on substance for him. He wondered that he had never before entertained the idea seriously. It had been for him as if between the act of sex and its consequence there was no causal connection. He recollected that among his reasons for marrying this possibility had carried not one particle of real weight. In that he had thought like a boy to whom consequences are only shadows. Now boyish too, he thought, was his growing and uncontrollable annoyance at the fact. Not annoyance that a child was to be born, that he must take on the hitherto unconsidered role of father; all this seemed still very far away. He was annoyed simply because this new turn of events must curtail and modify the pleasures that the last two months had brought him. And not

those pleasures only, in themselves, but his whole attitude toward those pleasures; his whole attitude, in fact, toward this new situation in which his marriage had involved him. He might have been for the first time perceiving and rebelling against the seriousness latent in all the extremes of human pleasure.

Through the following days he went about with this sense of annoyance constantly present in his mind. At times it came out in an irritability that caused Logan to look at him with a still greater measure of the reserve he had kept toward Duncan since the marriage. Logan had not yet been near the house; and would not go, Duncan knew, without specific orders. In words, he had never acknowledged the change. But it was not to him only that Duncan's irritability showed itself. There were moments when he could not quite conceal it from Nettie. A word would come shorter than he had meant it; or simply a look not tempered by any feeling of sympathy. To these things she was childishly sensitive. They would bring the pout to her lips. Sometimes, before she hid it, he could see that her eyes grew suddenly moist, as though really smarting at some physical irritation. This would anger him, but he showed it only by persisting in silence for a long time. Until one day when he had been short with her she surprised him. Her eyes became moist, but they became bright too, and she did not turn away. She looked straight at him.

"It's not any more my fault than it is yours. You're to blame too." She said it with a little heat. Then she dropped her eyes.

Her reaction shook him out of the anger he had already begun to feel. He was silent. He watched her back. She had turned to the big desk, was putting things aimlessly with objects that lay upon its surface. Sunlight fell on her through the window. It glowed upon her hair, on the softness of her neck that was exposed above her collar. Quietly he went to her. He kissed her neck where the sunlight fell most golden on it. She turned around and pressed hard against his body, her breast, her stomach, her thighs. He kissed her tight eyelids. With his lips wet he kissed her mouth.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I'm sorry." And then, "I'm glad you're going to have a baby."

She held her body to him tighter than ever. He kept on whispering to her. After a little she went with him, no further away than to the sofa.

The incident made a difference. It did not end his annoyance, but it was like a beginning of the end. It was like an illumination by which he could see through and beyond the mood which had possessed him lately. Because of it he was able to conceal whatever irritation he still felt. He was more attentive to her. At his own prompting he did things in the house and in the yard that he knew would be handy for her. He made suggestions, that she take naps sometimes, or walks, or go fishing with a pole he would fix for her. They drove to Nashville on a Saturday afternoon and spent the evening. At a movie she watched with an absorption that amused him a tearful-yet-happy drama about the everyday ups and downs of a middle-class family in a middle-sized town called Centerville, U.S.A. They got back very late that night. Perhaps they would do that every so often, since she seemed to enjoy it greatly. There were many things he might do, many improvements he could make. He and his people before him had lived on so little that he could afford even some more expensive things. A car, maybe. The old truck was an embarrassment, especially when they went to Nashville. And one thing he must do now. He would make Logan come down and introduce himself. He had pleaded the old Negro's shyness. It was a plea to which there was no substance whatever, because Logan had all the natural poise of an ambassador. He was a little afraid Nettie might see through it and be hurt. He would make Logan apologize for his tardiness.

But the greatest alteration in his behavior toward her was that he tried to talk to her more. In the past there had been only too many long if not hostile silences between them. Now he sought things to talk about with her. He told her of experiences he had had. In the beginning he told her about his people, how they had come there so many years ago from Virginia and cleared the land little by little (what timber was here then, what ash and poplar yellow as the sun—that's why this house had stood; that, and because they were men who built with their hands and their hearts for themselves and their children and their children's children without distinction) and built first a small house and then

this big one. He told her about the generations, what had befallen them, and about the war. As simply as he could he tried to explain to her why he had come back. Out there all was breaking, or broken. Already in many places, everywhere soon, men did not know or care who and what they were. The ties were falling away which had held together in spirit families, communities, the living and the dead. Loyalty was something that had come to be despised and half forgotten. But he stopped. He felt a little foolish. Her face did not show inattention, but no more did it show any understanding. She looked merely blank; or perhaps a little perplexed at what she could only regard as a peculiar and unexplainable view of things. She had no experience, nothing by which to comprehend what he was saying. To her, things were what they were; the past was not hers, it belonged to her forefathers. And if it had not been he, Duncan, who was saying all this, she would have believed it to be little more than nonsense.

So that for now, at least, he stuck to subjects whose interest they could easily share. The pleasure she took in these conversations was evident. Seeing her pleasure it ceased to be a chore for him to uphold his end. Soon they came naturally enough, and he learned to get a kind of real, if limited, enjoyment from them. He quickly learned what kind of things she liked best to talk about. Of these the one that pleased her most was to talk about the baby; especially when it was he who brought up the subject, as he did purposely on occasion. He was losing his antagonism for the idea; he felt neutral toward it.

"I know it'll be a boy," she said once, "just like you. I can already feel it in my bones. I'll be proud for him to look like you."

She spoke of it with so much vividness and warmth that at times she stimulated his interest momentarily. And this was to the good. It made him feel that out of his small efforts at kindness to her there might grow up between Nettie and him a real community of interest.

Because of his kindness she grew more spirited. Every day she seemed more like the mistress of the house and less like its servant. She took an interest in the farm and its activities, which Duncan encouraged. Sometimes during the afternoon she would come to the field where Duncan

was working, and look on from a distance. It was pleasant for him to look up, sweating, from his work in the hay or the tobacco and see her standing there. She was the one pale spot in the landscape, like the tiny pupil that indistinctly shows out of a hot and green-glaring eye. He imagined that the air was cooler where she was. At such times, in spite of the muscular strain of work, he felt his desire awaken.

She admired the colt. She would stop and look at him grazing in the pasture. One day she came to the barn lot when Duncan was working him on a line. Chief circled him at a quick walk. Duncan pivoted, pacing him. In one hand he held the line; in the other he had a long crop. Now and then he reached out with the tip of the crop and touched the colt softly on the rump or under the neck. The colt was not frightened, but he heeded it. He hurried or slowed his pace accordingly.

"Watch him," Duncan said as she came up. "He oversteps a good eight inches now. He'll beat that when he's ridden."

After a little he stopped the colt.

"Come on and get to know him. I won't let him tear your clothes off again."

Gently she stroked the white blaze. "It's so pretty. Just like snow."

"Maybe you can ride him some day. He'll be big enough to break next spring." Duncan showed her how much he had grown, how much more he would probably grow. He would be a big horse, but not gross. Duncan showed her why. As he talked he traced with his hands the lines of the colt's body. He even knelt and touched one of the front legs, on the knee, the cannon bone, the hoof. Chief submitted nervously, fretting a little with his head. Duncan spent much time on the head. He made her move around to see it in profile while he with his hands as well as his voice described its perfection to her.

"I wonder why his eye's like that," she said when he finished.

"Just in his blood. A lot of horses have glass eyes."

"But it makes him look like he hates everything."

"Well . . ." He said this a little sharply; he had ceased long ago to notice the eye. "Then look at his other eye."

"It don't make any difference. He's a beautiful colt."

She wanted to lead him then. Chief went with her hesitantly, stretching taut the line. His eyes were walled, his nostrils quivered. After a short distance he balked completely. She pulled at the line.

"He won't go."

She pulled harder. But there was no moving him now, his feet were set. Duncan went over and took the line from her.

"He's not used to anybody but me. He'll get over it."

As he turned to lead the colt into the barn, he felt the line jerk. He heard the dull blow, and he heard Nettie cry out. She was bending over, rubbing her knee. She was moaning softly.

"Was it your knee?"

"There." A red mark showed just below the kneecap.

"Does it hurt much?"

"It'll stop in a minute." But she was getting pale. He made her sit down. After a moment she said, "It's better now. It's just he kicked me right on the bone."

Duncan picked up the crop and went into the barn. Chief stood in the hallway tossing his head like a stallion. The halter jingled faintly; the line writhed in silence with the motion. He did not offer to run away when Duncan came up and seized the line.

"Bastard," Duncan whispered.

Chief's ears went up. He shied back as far as the line permitted. It was as though he had understood, or had sensed in Duncan something entirely strange and new. His reaction stopped Duncan's hand; the crop remained at his side. He had his anger still. But into it had entered an element of surprise at what he had been about to do. He thought that never had he whipped the colt, out of anger, with real strength and energy, as he would have done just now. Then he thought that such a whipping would be less than useless, that the colt would not even understand what he was punished for. Without a touch or a word he put the colt in his stall and shut the door.

When he got outside, Nettie was up and limping around. She smiled at him. It was all right now, she said, it would just be sore for a day or two. But he made her go with him to the house and bathe it in liniment.

He went to see Aunt Virgy. He was not afraid of her any more, but he felt guilty. It had been an inexcusable length of time since he had visited her, not since way last fall just before Nettie came back. He knew she was well, or he would have heard. But he owed it to her to have gone long ago. She doted on his visits. He had kept putting it off until now, even wanting to go, it was more than a little hard. He took her a present, something he cherished that had long been in the house. It was a bright crystal wine bottle with octagonal sides, and nearly as tall as his knee. The heavy crystal was lined throughout with delicate crisscrossed veins of silver metal. In the sun it seemed to burn with a white radiance all its own. He hesitated to take it. Then he thought that of all the things he might give her this would delight her most. He said nothing to Nettie. He carried it in a box carefully under his arm.

The afternoon was clouding. Swollen thunderheads boiled up out of the west. The heat itself promised rain. When he was still some hundreds of yards from the cabin, the crow saw him. He heard it first. He saw it rise above the cabin and circle high over his head with harsh continuous calls of alarm. As he approached, it flew away to the top of the ridge and perched, still calling, in the highest branches of a tree.

The shutters were closed tight. The door too seemed to be closed. He got the impression that the place was deserted. He was so struck with the feeling that he paused. Surely he would have known had anything happened. He saw that the door was open a crack. It revealed a darkness like night inside. He paused again at the door and listened. He heard something. It took him a moment to realize that the sound was Aunt Virgy's voice muttering. The words were low and indistinguishable. At intervals the voice stopped completely, as though for brief periods of rest. Then it resumed again. In a way the effect was that of a prayer repeated to weariness. But the tone was not prayerful; it was gruff. The way it grew harsh sometimes in half-whispered ejaculations suggested rather blasphemy than praise or supplication.

"Aunt Virgy."

The muttering stopped; not abruptly but softly dying, as though on a final breath. No answer came. He pushed the

door back. The heat, suffocating, was like an invisible barrier. The light fell on her eyes. They were looking squarely at him from where she sat far back in the room. Perhaps because of her blindness she did not blink at the light. Or perhaps because her eyes were afire already with such an intensity of their own that the sun had no effect on them. They were savagely red; they looked almost diseased. Her stare held him in silence for a space; until it was she who uttered the first sound, a single grunt, and let her head fall forward to where he imagined it had rested before he called to her. Around the room was all the familiar and bright-colored litter standing or hanging just as always. But not just as always, either. It looked dusty now, even where the light did not strike, as though she had left off the scrupulous attention to it which in the past had furnished half the pleasure of her life. He noticed too, with surprise, that the floor needed sweeping badly. But looking at her he could see no change. Except what he had seen at first in her eyes, which was only a thing of the moment and would pass off by tomorrow. Her little mummy-like body, like the person it contained, was incapable of change. It was only that she was angry . . . or hurt.

"Aunt Virgy."

He saw no answer on her lips, though he thought her head moved slightly.

"I'm sorry I've been so long coming. So many things happened." He paused. "I won't stay away any more."

She did not answer.

He held out the box to her. "Here's something I brought you."

When she made no move to take it he stooped down and set the box on the floor in front of her and opened it. He held the bottle so that the sun fell on it. Its radiance reflected suddenly in her eyes. Then, in the intensity of their redness, the eyes seemed near to bursting with the blood that had lain quiet before.

"I send for you and you never come." She said it with startling ferocity. But since he had no excuse his anger was disarmed.

"You know what all's happened, don't you?"

"You married, ain't you?" Scorn contracted her voice to a guttural resonant whisper.

"Yes, I'm married."

"Not by the Bible, you ain't."

"All right. Then I'm not."

"I reckon you got you a fine lady out of that trashy cropper's shack?"

"She's as fine as I want." He thought he would not take much more of Aunt Virgy's insolence.

"Is her family move in yet? They be there. They thinking right now they done eat they last poke salad."

He turned and set the bottle on the table.

"Aunt Virgy, this is none of your business," he said, controlling his anger. "I'll come again when you've got your manners back."

"You stay," she cried. There was such violence in her cry that he turned automatically. Her face worked as though in the nervous grip of an oncoming fit. "My manners! I learnt my manners when they were such a thing . . . 'fore the Lord ever even think you up. Then folks knowed what to do with trash." The pause which followed was the fault of her lack of breath. Her mouth did not cease to move in a kind of dry spasm. "Why didn't you never come? You come like you ought this never of happen."

"I wanted it to happen, Aunt Virgy." Immediately he thought that he should say no more, that her shrunken and frail body might in fact collapse with the fury it contained. But suddenly she seemed to control herself. Only her bloody eyes were witness now to the violence of what she felt. Her face became almost cunning.

"She in a family way, ain't she?"

"Yes." He was surprised at her knowing this.

"It ain't none of yours."

Her words left him mute, both with rage and with amazement that even her fury could move her to so far forget herself.

"You wait," she said with a coolness that seemed a contradiction. "I ain't made that up, like you think. I telling you the truth."

"Of course you made it up. It's a lie and you know it."

"No, it ain't no lie. I knows."

"All right then, who is the father?" His voice had mounted, though at the same time he was thinking what a fool he was to stay at all.

"It's that no-count Jordan boy, that's who it is."

"Dicky Jordan?" he sneered. But something came into his mind then.

"That's him." Her eyes watched him narrowly.

"That's a damn lie, Aunt Virgy. Even if it was true you got no way of knowing."

"I knows it the way I knows a heap of things."

"You imagine it the way you imagine a heap of things. You think every lie that comes in your head's a vision straight from God." But his mind felt heavy with the memory of Dicky Jordan's face.

She ignored his taunt, watching him narrowly. "And I ain't the only one as knows. You ask Naylor. Ask any of them niggers lives down there."

"Those niggers'll say anything."

"Ask Logan. He won't tell you no lie."

"How would he know? Or any of them. I know when I got that baby. I know the very day." And yet he felt a little sick with the memory of Jordan's face, the look of amusement, of insolence, with which it had regarded Nettie and him across the smoky room that night at Benny's. It suddenly became for him the one memorable face, like the face of Satan once glimpsed and never to be forgotten. He realized that Aunt Virgy was not answering, was gazing at him intently. She said:

"You ask him. Ask Naylor . . . he seen them at it."

"When did he see them?" Duncan demanded, too loudly.

"A while back. But that don't—"

"When?"

She did not bat an eye. "Been a little better'n a year, I reckon. But that don't make no difference. Jordan ain't went nowhere." It was her calm, her apparent reasonableness, which more than ever stirred that suggestion of nausea in the pit of his belly.

"That was a long time ago . . . before I even knew her. It doesn't mean anything . . . about this. Even if he wasn't lying." Duncan paused. "Why didn't Logan say something, if he knows? Just hint at it? He's known me long enough."

"How he know what you aim to do. Nobody didn't. Nobody but me, I knowed. But you never come; even when I

send down for you." Her voice, like her eyes, kindled again at these last words. But her anger meant nothing to him now.

"How could Naylor know, anyway? He couldn't have seen them. They wouldn't have . . . right out in the open."

"You ask him. He know all right. He were in that barn when they come in—that hay barn. He seen them go up in the loft. And he heared them at it. He heared it all."

She paused. She looked at him with eyes in which there was nothing except a red gemlike hardness. He felt a pallor in his face. He felt his gaze fixed on her with an intensity strangely compounded of his revulsion, and of something else—a kind of sickened desire. It was only when she blinked her eyes one time heavily—the effect was like that of ruddy lamps suddenly darkened and as suddenly burning again—it was only then that he saw she had read the truth in his heart. The words that her lips had already begun to form he himself had half invited. She leaned a little forward, as though deliberately to punish him with her words. Her voice was a rapid hard and half-croaking monotone.

"He heared that hay shaking. And her grunting and telling him how much she like it and not never stop. And when he get through with her she keep right on begging him do it to her again. And he get mad and say he ain't no goat—"

"You're lying, Aunt Virgy—you know it. You know Naylor never told you those things." His own voice sounded strange to him.

"Ask him. See what he say. . . . And he know something else too. This ain't the first time she been in a family way. That Jordan give her something brung it off. Else she done have a baby before now."

He noticed the stifling heat of the cabin. He felt physically sick. He turned and went out into the sunshine. But her voice, raised shrilly, pursued him still. He did not try to listen. But he got the gist: that the baby was none of his; that it wouldn't never be born, not on this land; that the Lord would make it die, she had done asked him to, and He would. In it all there was the ring of an energy that seemed beyond her frail powers. There was something

threatening and prophetic about it, like some old Bible curse. He walked on without looking back. Until, after a pause, her insistent calling of his name made him look around. She stood in the door. She held up the flashing wine bottle in the sunlight and called to him in the same shrill way:

"You take it back. It don't belong here. Belong down to the house."

He walked on without answering. He went rapidly at first, and then slow. The afternoon seemed to him all of a sudden intolerable, as breathless as Aunt Virgy's cabin. Cloud shadows slipped over him; they brought no relief from the heat. He reached the creek and turned onto the path under the bluff. He stopped. He retched violently. When it was over he stood leaning against the bluff, resting his forehead against the cool stone.

"Hello," Aaron said. He stood a few steps away and gazed at Duncan. He had the shotgun under his arm. In one hand, he held a big fox squirrel. The old dog had already lain down on the ground near his feet.

"You look like you seen a ghost."

In that moment Aaron seemed to him the one man on earth to be envied, the one man with an almost virgin freedom, without ties of fealty to anything beyond himself. To whatever the world might think or do, he was indifferent, invulnerable. Momentarily, Duncan had an urge to repeat the whole thing to him. He felt the need of a clear head to disentangle this intertwisted confusion of truth and lies. Or would it make any difference?

"Got sick all of a sudden. Guess I better go to the house."

"You looking bad," Aaron said. The whole time he held fixed on Duncan his tawny studious gaze. Duncan felt it still on his back as he walked away.

Instantly he stepped onto the footbridge he saw her. He stopped. She sat on the ground in the front yard lazily sunning herself. She was dressed in a halter and shorts. Her naked thighs gleamed like palely browning ivory in the sun. He held the railing of the bridge, noticing distantly the rough grain of the lumber against his hand. As he looked at her he saw with equal vividness the image which Aunt Virgy's voice, eyes, had burned into his brain. He felt his

face flush again with the heat of that same nausea and desire. At this moment she stretched and lay back on the ground with her knees in the air. It was his impulse then to seize her violently and shake her until the last syllable of truth, the last ugly detail, spilled from her lips. But he gripped the railing. He took his eyes away from her and looked down into the water. It was deep beneath him, blue and cool; three big carp lay as if asleep at the surface. The sight of it cooled his brain, like moisture on a feverish tongue. He would wait. He would go back, unseen, and find some shady place on the bank of the creek. There he would sit the afternoon out and turn the thing in his mind. For a moment the idea struck him as the perfect and final solution to all his trouble. He glanced up. She was waving to him. He crossed the bridge. Instead of going toward her he cut off sharp and walked straight and busily to the porch door on the rear side of the house.

In the parlor he stopped. At first he felt vaguely like a man who has forgotten the reason for his errand, who looks around him with the hope that something will suggest it to him. He was oppressed by the realization that he had had no purpose at all in entering. The room was like a dead end into which he had wandered and which he had no reason to leave. At least no reason except the numb depression that had come upon him since he entered. And this was familiar, if now much exaggerated. It was as though at last, because it was his destiny, he had returned to the room after a pleasant absence of several months. Except for a few mildly disturbing changes—and these only temporary—it was the same. Its effect on him was different only in being more pronounced. Especially he noticed the silence. In this silence, each toneless stroke of the clock was swallowed up instantly. It was the old unequal struggle; the vacuum was infinite.

He thought of her in the yard. She would come in soon. He went to the desk busily, as though someone were watching him, and sat down and opened one of the drawers. There were a couple of bills and a long neglected farm report that he could attend to now. He laid them on the table and took up the pen. A breeze came through the window; the curtains shuddered. As he looked out he saw a shadow slide across the yard. The sun was gone, leaving only its

heat and a dusky light in the room. It would rain. He was glad for it. You always needed rain in the summer. It made a difference in everything—in the air, in the color of the earth, in the tempo of your heart. When it came, he thought, he would go out in it and get wet to the skin.

He was thinking this when he heard the screen door fall shut. He forced his attention to the papers. When she came in he was writing, very slowly, spelling out the words to himself.

"Don't you want some light?" She stood behind him. If she touched him she would be sure to feel the tension.

"No, I don't need it." He was relieved when she went to the sofa and sat down. He would say nothing about it now.

"Did you see that old nigger?"

"Yes." He could see her still, at the moment when the anger burned reddest in her eyes, and her voice with a certain vicious relish evoked the coarsest of images. Behind this image even the eyes and the voice paled. It was like something she had bequeathed him, something left palpable and intact for him after his memory had begun to fade. For an instant he was teased by the notion that it corresponded to nothing, that he was alone in the house just as he had been always since his father's death. He glanced at her out of the tail of his eye. She sat hugging her knees on the sofa. She looked almost completely naked. She was watching him, had caught his glance.

"Is something the matter?"

He meant to say no, but he did not say anything. He felt her gaze. He knew just how innocent and how timid her face was looking at that moment. With the pen he scratched a heavy wavering line across the sheet of paper. It cut through near the edge and tore its way out. He did not look up.

"What about Dicky Jordan?"

He could count in his throat the strokes of his heart. She was too slow in answering. He caught the fright in her voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Is it true something went on . . ." He hesitated. ". . . between you and him."

He stared at the paper. The pause was like something stretched out painfully taut in his bowels. He picked up only irrelevant sounds, the clock, the first flurry of raindrops,

things that entered his mind like words of a language meaningless to him.

"Well, is it true?"

"It . . . it was a long time ago. Before I even knew you."

"Did he take you to bed?"

"But it wasn't . . . He was so . . . We worked for him, and I—" She broke down. He let her struggle for a moment.

"He did, though . . . have you?"

She was silent.

She said falteringly, "He made me do it. I didn't want to. It's just . . . he made me."

"You mean he twisted your arm . . . or tied you up?" The reflection that he was being merciless flashed across his mind and vanished.

"No, not like that. You know. It's just I was scared of him. And he kept on kind of bullying me. He wouldn't let me alone."

"How many times did he *make* you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Once . . . maybe twice."

"Or maybe more?" He looked at her. She was looking down. But he could see her eyelids and the tears beneath them. He was not moved. Or if he was it was not toward mercy.

"No. Just a few times. Not over three or four. But I never did want to. It never happened after I met you."

"Did he get you pregnant?"

Her affirmation was so muffled as to be almost inaudible.

"And he gave you something to bring it off?"

"I didn't know what to do. There was nothing else to do."

She turned from him and put her face against the back of the sofa. In the cloudy light the color of her naked back had the pale richness of cream. He thought, hearing the rain increase, that it was true then, most of it, all but what he had known was a lie; even that image which, as it were, was impressed on the backs of his eyeballs.

"Where did you go those times? You must have gone somewhere to do it."

"Please don't. It doesn't matter." Her crying was audible now in her voice.

"Where did you go?"

"I don't know. The barn . . . his car."

"In the loft?"

She did not answer. Her head nodded an almost imperceptible yes. Her crying, silent again, became visible in the movements of her shoulders.

"It must have been a job to make you climb the ladder when you didn't want to."

"I didn't. I told you. I never did want to."

"But when he got through you begged him to do it again. Didn't you?"

For the first time she looked at him. Her eyes looked unfocused, almost blind, through the tears. She turned away as she spoke. "No; I didn't. You're making that up. I never would of ever done that."

"Somebody heard you, though . . . from downstairs." He was standing up. He was not conscious just when he had stood, but only that his perspective was changed. She was below him now. Slumped against the back of the sofa, her face hidden, her knees drawn up, she seemed to be huddled against the fear of attack.

"Somebody heard it all. They heard the hay shaking. And you were grunting and telling him how much you liked it and not to ever stop."

"I didn't. It's not true."

"You don't remember that part. It was too good then."

Her shoulders, her head, were drawn up in a kind of arrested flinch. She did not answer.

"And with Dicky Jordan . . . that sleazy fop. He probably boasted around about his manhood. . . . And you let him—" The word hung in his mouth as though his lips, suddenly grown numb, resisted forming it. He flung it out with all the emphasis of a word difficult to pronounce. Turned loose in the room its ugliness seemed to reverberate, to awaken out of the air some dormant and immaterial violence. With one part of his mind he listened and was shocked, even while he felt the beating of his heart quicken more than ever. But she on the sofa seemed, by that word frozen in her own stillness. Her shoulders did not twitch any longer; her very lungs appeared to have ceased the movement of life.

"You gave him all he wanted, didn't you? And then some."

He was standing over her. Her flesh seemed to quiver, like a horse's skin, when he put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's my turn now, isn't it?"

It took the strength of his arm to raise her up. Her face had the shaken twilight look of half-stunned consciousness. But it flashed with pain when next his hand moved. Her recoil was one simultaneous spasm of her hands, her eyes, her voice. The cry was some throat-strangled fragment of speech. She thrust back his body with her hands and struggled to her feet. Her strength surprised even the full exertion of his muscles. She jerked free. He took one step forward; but then, seeing her wheel and lunge like someone dizzy toward a door which is spinning, he let his hands fall to his sides.

He was gazing through the empty door, hearing her footsteps, hearing once a kind of dry explosive sob, and then the clap of a door. He felt tired suddenly; the way very old men must feel tired, whose blood flows only sluggishly despite the heavy laboring of their hearts. He noticed how hard it was raining outside. Everything at a distance was blurred and silver-gray. He passed through the door and went out into the rain, out into the pasture.

His shirt clung to his skin. His trousers sloshed weightily about his legs when he walked. It was growing dusk, and still the rain poured down. The water fell in flashing sheets and spouts from the eaves of the house; in the yard it collected in turbulent puddles. Approaching the house he scarcely tried to avoid them; they were no colder than his feet. There was no light in any part of the house that he could see. He stepped up onto the porch; he heard the rain drumming. He sat down on the swing for a while. He did not stop shivering, did not even want to stop. The activity drained some of the mind's attention. Still he heard no sound of life from inside.

He opened the screen and went in. The darkness bulked heavy in places—in corners, under the stairs, around large pieces of furniture. Only a single mirror and the glass face of a picture here and there held a pallid sheen of light. He found himself walking like a thief, pained by the wheeze of his saturated shoes. He was startled

when he saw that the door of the bedroom she had entered stood open. Dim light from the window showed to his glance the crumpled emptiness of the broad bed. But he stepped in anyway to look. He went to the kitchen. He called once, softly. But whether his voice had sounded at all above a whisper, or whether the word had simply been swallowed up before it even had time to echo in the audible almost ponderable drift of darkness collecting in the house, was not certain.

He went out and to the footbridge and crossed to the other end. He stared into the rain and called again. The raindrops hissed in the leaves over his head. In the face of the water they seemed to awaken a myriad blurred and fitful silver lights. He went back and got the truck. He forded the creek. The truck sloshed along a rainy tunnel the headlights bored out of the dark. At a little distance the beams broke off sharply, as though they were pushing mass before them. In one instant the mass was abrupt, featureless, sliding ahead of the beams; in the next it seemed to gape, to void with dreamlike suddenness into the light a solid upright figure. He had to slam the brakes. Her face when she turned into the light was like something savagely pale atop a dead and colorless trunk. Her hair lay down wetly against her skull. Water streamed from the sleeves and from the hem of her coat. She did not respond to his words; but to his hand she did, as dumbly and mechanically as if he held a goad against her side. All the way back she did not speak. Outside the front door she said one thing. She stopped. She said:

"I don't want to go back in there any more."

"Nonsense."

They went in without another word.

He woke up sometime during the night; sometime late, for it seemed hours that he had lain quite still in controlled muscular restlessness. It was her breathing. Each expulsion of air was like an attempted whistle through half-pursed lips. This, and the rustle of springs and covers, as though she rocked slowly without cessation from flank to flank.

"What's the matter?"

"I think—" Her motion, her breathing even, seemingly had come to a stop. The next sound was the creak of his own bed, his bare feet scuffling on the boards, his hands

blundering among objects that littered the dresser. He found a match.

As the lamplight swelled, her face came at him out of the dark. There was something ghostlike in the way it emerged shedding the darkness, or dissolving it in a pallor which under the full light approached the intense whiteness of her pillow; and something ghostlike in the muteness, the absolute unexpression of dumb suffering in her face. Surrounded by that pallor, her eyes looked dark and deep, like little wells of ink. At the center of each one, like a core, a tiny light no bigger than a buckshot burned. He stepped to the foot of her bed. Her eyes followed him and the tiny lights went out in their darkness.

"It's the baby?"

She only looked at him out of that interior darkness. But when he told her he must go for help her face suddenly came alive. She rose onto her elbow, and her answer was such a brief "no" as might have been wrung from her by torture.

"But there's got to be somebody. I don't know what to do."

It made no difference. Nothing he said could penetrate the fear she felt at the thought of being left alone. Once he thought she really did mean to get up. He stepped to her side quickly. She seized his hand in a grip that almost hurt.

"Not all by myself . . . in this house."

He sat down at her side. Her grip did not relax, though minutes had passed. She did not look at him any more; or at anything, seemingly. Sometimes her hand would close tighter still on his during moments when her body grew tense and then broke into a small and instantaneous spasm. In her grip there was nothing personal; she glanced at him only once, fearfully, when he shifted his seat on the bed. She simply held a living hand, any hand, because she was in pain and afraid, because it was a human hand and so her only assurance against whatever specters her rigid senses could feel or hear or see. For somehow in the painless intervals she did seem preternaturally alert, with an alertness quite apart from her anticipation of pain to come. So that he began to feel that the descents of her intermittent and body-retching labors were not the central thing at all, were only torturous interruptions of a vigil still more torturous.

Her head lay motionless on the pillow but not in rest; its real support appeared to be the strutted and unrelenting muscles of her neck. Her eyes did not move either; but they were watching. When the pain came on her and her eyes darkened, he fancied that her straining was an effort only to force back into her eyes the vision of which they had been drained. He felt himself watching with her, intent upon what his imagination could not even conceive, could only suggest, as though it dealt with the shapeless elements of something uncreated. The effort unnerved him. He was relieved when he heard the clock strike, four times, thunderously. The sound was like substance suddenly present in the void where he had been groping.

He heard the clock strike four-thirty. During all that time she had glanced at him only twice, briefly, when he had made as though to remove his hand. Her labors seemed to have nearly stopped. They came at infrequent intervals now, causing only the mildest convulsions. Even the intensity of her vigil, he thought, had relaxed somewhat with the falling off of pain. He noticed that for moments at a time her eyes closed, and then sprang open again, wide, as though she had dozed in spite of herself. But even through these spells of dozing her hand held the same hard pressure on his. He sat there, thinking how now he was to her nothing more than a hand, a means; how impersonal had been his own begetting of all this abortive agony, thinking how the child, a boy, would have looked; thinking that now it was almost day, and then he could go for help.

She spoke to him suddenly, the quietest whisper. Her eyes were wide. That core of light was back again in their darkness. He looked at her, questioning.

"Did you hear anything?" she whispered.

"You were dreaming."

She looked away, dark-eyed, at the ceiling. Her whisper rose just barely above the level silence. "I wasn't asleep. It was like somebody mumbling. I've been hearing it."

"Maybe it was me. I mumble out loud sometimes when I'm thinking."

"It didn't come from any place. It was just in my ears, going on and on, kind of up and down. Just like hearing somebody mumbling in a real big dark room, and you don't know where it's coming from, it's just in the air." He waited

for the end of what he felt was a pause. Finally, just as he started to speak, her voice reached him again.

"Do you reckon there really is a devil?"

"It was just a dream. Try to go on to sleep."

Her eyes turned directly on him. For an instant they held a familiar look of trust and innocent dependence. A wave of new pity came over him. Then the lids flicked once and erased them as clean as wet dark stones. She looked back at the ceiling.

He left her lying asleep in the rigid pose of a corpse laid out. He blew out the lamp. Her face, her neck, her bare arms, looked powder gray in the first dawn light. Outside, the morning air breathed over him like a blessing. He crowded his lungs with it. One long exhalation seemed to empty him of that numb yet feverish tautness that had built up in his chest. The pasture grass still wore the somber green of nighttime. But already, somewhere hidden, the kildees and larks had set up their morning calls. He walked fast. Even the dumb pity he felt could scarcely survive the sense of new freedom which did not leave him until he returned with Della. Immediately he saw that the pains had started again, that they must have been coming on her almost since he left the house. He spoke to her. Her face was like stone. He could not tell whether she had even glanced at him.

"You get on, Mr. Duncan. You ain't no use in here," Della said.

He left the room with relief.

"Dead things lie heavy. It's a heap of trouble for a woman to throw out something dead, no matter how little it is," Dr. Poole said, gnawing his unlighted cigar between big yellow teeth. "Don't help itself any. All push and muscle, moving dead weight. That's why it wears a woman down so bad."

It was afternoon then, just before he had gone in to see her. When he did go it was only for a little while. He tried, at first. Though it felt dusty in his mouth he managed a hard-won and stumbling apology. It was the way he knew it would be, like a faithless act of contrition to a deity of

stone. She did not show even regret, much less anger or outrage. Her numbness came not of spent nerves and muscles working inward on the spirit, but the reverse; as this birth had been not birth at all but its opposite. She answered laconically, distantly; the impersonal answers a sleeper will give to questions. He retreated at last in heavy-footed silence.

Six weeks later she was gone. They did live out those weeks in a certain spirit of mutual consideration and courtesy. It was a kind of dumb show, not even obscuring what they both from the first felt to be inevitable. Yet they avoided like pain the last act or omission which would disintegrate that final appearance of what except by the fact of physical proximity had ceased even to resemble a marriage. They shared the same room still. Thus, at times, they talked to each other in a way that mocked their former conversations. Thus they avoided even the shadow-slim chance of repairing what had been destroyed—in the fear that merely to bring it up at all might constitute that final act of disintegration. It was tiring to them both. Perhaps more tiring to him than to her, he thought; because in every phase of it he saw with a certain bitter ennui the repetition, or at least the familiar counterpart of what had happened before. It made him reflect how life in one guise or another was forever inescapably turning back upon itself. Then, one day, without any overt act, without any omission aside from the ordinary, it came to an end. It was as though they both at the same moment had reached the point of exhaustion. This was the necessary conclusion, requiring only the briefest, the mildest utterance and assent. He helped her load her things on the truck. Wesley took her home.

The very next afternoon, a Sunday, Margaret Mary came to visit. She had not come since their father had died. But it was by coincidence, he was convinced from her manner. She had not heard the latest. She looked around inquiringly, a little evasively, he thought. He did not tell her then. He felt stiff in her presence, on his guard.

"She's not here," he said.

She stood in the hall for a moment, just standing, with no apparent aim, listening, breathing. Her clothes were the

same quiet color as always. They went out and sat on the porch.

She did know about the baby. She spoke of it with sympathy.

"We don't have much luck that way, do we?"

There was that in the way she said it, in her expression, which softened him. He thought suddenly that there was less of Garner in her. It was as though the years were rolled back. What was revealed was not the familiar Margaret Mary; there was something, some warm and unique reflection in her eyes, which he recognized out of a past time, which had lain submerged through all these years and only lately perhaps had become visible again. And with a certain exaggeration that struck him more as he watched. It seemed to suggest that her rigid character had at last given rein to sentiment which she had so long repressed, scorned in those who revealed it. Not that her expression of outward rigidity had mellowed. Rather she seemed confirmed in that angular, tough, and controlled look of aging maidenhood which he had thought marriage might soften. She was thinner, if anything; more run to bone. And her blue eyes, paler than ever, watched from deeper in her head. But underneath this appearance, that new, or old-new thing subtly made itself felt. It was like a promise, or a threat, that one day it would burgeon in her face.

"I was surprised when you got married."

"I ought to have told you, I guess. . . . What did you think? I know what your husband thought . . . don't I?"

Immediately he feared he had said the wrong thing. But she did not show irritation. Instead she looked a little defensive, subdued.

"I'll bet he approved, didn't he? What did he say—that was the best thing that could happen to me, mixing in with the people?"

"I don't know. Something like that. Let's not—"

"What did you think?"

"I . . . didn't know."

"You were right."

She looked at him, expectant.

"It's all over."

Her mouth formed a small slow meditative gesture of exclamation. Then she said softly, "When?"

"You just missed it. Yesterday. At least it terminated yesterday. Didn't last long, did it?"

She mused. "And no chance—?"

He shook his head. "I should have known better in the first place. I was a fool—again."

A long time and she did not say anything, waiting to see if he would speak. She looked down toward the water. She seemed strangely reposeful.

"What will you do now?"

"Nothing. Why should I? I'm no worse off than I was before. Maybe I've got one or two fewer illusions."

"Don't be bitter. You haven't anybody to blame but yourself." She said it in a gently musing way, like a habitual maxim, not so much directed at him as simply sprung, dislodged, by the temper of what he had said. It set him studying her again.

"You never thought of selling this place, then?"

"No. Why?"

"Just I thought you might want to sometime. I guess I've been a little afraid you might. It's still like home to me, I think about it so much. A lot of times when I'm someplace and think about going home, before I catch myself I'm thinking about the front gate and crossing the ford and my room upstairs. It's just I was here so long . . . and lonesome here so much." She threw him a thin smile that was half a grimace. "Do you get lonesome?"

"I was used to it before. I'll get used to it again."

"Sometimes I think I'd like to come back all by myself and just do nothing for a whole month but keep house and be lonesome." She gave him the same smile again.

"But you're the first lady of Brady, aren't you? Your husband runs the town, I hear . . . mayor and all."

"In a way, maybe. Hiram's . . . a strong man."

The first name never failed to surprise him. He always thought of the man simply as "Garner," like the name of a product.

"And look how Brady's 'improving.' Latest—"

"Let's not fuss. I didn't come here to fuss."

So they talked then, to and for each other, with an intimacy that seemed only the warmer for being resurrected. They talked a long time. He told her about the farm and its people. He told her about the colt, about its breeding. She

remembered dimly the old stud, or thought she did. She was certain she remembered the fire. He wanted to take her up to the barn, but there was not time enough.

Before she left she went about the house touching familiar objects, like an Indian who takes a brief communion with the spirits in things. She noticed immediately, with concern, that the portrait had been moved from the parlor. She wanted him to put it back, she always thought of it there. Together they carried it in and hung it where it belonged over the mantel.

"Doesn't the clock run any more?"

"It did, till yesterday. It's not of any use without a family."

Finally she went up to her bedroom alone.

Outside in the still, spent, the night-freshening heat of an August sunset, he gazed at her face through the window of her car. She squinted against the hovering orange disc of the sun.

"You've changed," he said. "I wouldn't have believed it. In a way, you're more like you used to be a long time ago."

"Maybe. We've all got to change sometime, one way or another. I can't tell about you . . . now. I'll have to notice later on."

"Maybe you can. How do you know this isn't *my* change . . . the real thing?"

She was regarding him closely, with affection. It was at this moment that he felt for her in full the resurgence of all his youthful respect and trust and love. He held her gaze for a little.

"You're welcome any time, you know. Even for a whole month." He smiled.

"That would be hard." She started the motor. "Hiram wouldn't like it. He would say I was being sentimental."

The very absence or irony in her voice chilled him suddenly. Its humorlessness was like a final affirmation of that loyalty which he had begun to believe, hope, was flagging. Then, her face grave, controlled, as though she had read his thoughts, she said:

"He's my husband, you know."

She smiled at him again and gently touched his hand where it rested on the window. But it did not warm him.

As her car drew away he had a powerful sense of growing distance between himself and her.

He did not go into the house then. He went to the barn, where the feeding was already done, to Chief's door, and leaned there murmuring into the darkening stall. Now and then Chief raised his head from the feedbox and tossed it deliberately. His white blaze flashed in the shadows.

PART 3

CHAPTER ONE

The bright first of May. The land was at its greenest, hills and pastures and bottoms, foliage and grass and grain. It seemed there was nothing in nature on which a body might even so much as bruise itself. The doors of the barn, east and west, stood open wide. The morning breeze passed through the length of the corridor; it cleansed the barn of all its rank sharp odors. Even here, midway of the corridor, he breathed the scent of sap and bloom.

Logan and Wesley stood by. The look on their faces resembled what he felt. It was an expression like that of faces at a wedding, faces of intimates; expectant, glad, concerned. Because this was the day, the moment. He had saved this day out of all the others that might have done just as well. He had chosen it months ago, fixed on it, so that it came to seem as irrevocably set as the date of Christmas or Easter. Now it had come. And yet he stood hesitating at the door, looking in. Not a colt any longer . . . a stallion now. With the spring he had shed like his winter coat the last of that gawkiness, the last accidental and undisciplined flesh. Or rather he had digested it, translated it into the smooth hard-crowded power which at any motion of his body winked beneath the hide of rump or shoulder. His neck had thickened. He had a way of arching

it slightly when he looked pert-eared at something as he was looking at Duncan now. His hide was the color of chocolate. His mane, fine with long and painful combing, fell down his neck like a cascade of flax. It broke into flashing turbulent ripples at every toss of his head.

Duncan went in and bridled him. He had bought a new snaffle bit for the occasion. The horse came out walking gingerly on his new-shod hoofs. The shoes struck the hard-packed dirt like rapid hammer blows. Duncan stopped him where the sunlight fell at the east end of the corridor. The horse fretted and stamped with his hoofs and the big shoes flashed silver. Pale highlights trembled and shifted over the swell of his muscles.

"He sure do look good," Logan said. "And he look better'n that, time summer out. Like his old granddaddy. They sure resembles."

"Mr. Duncan, are you behind good and tough?" Wesley said. He held the saddle. Duncan took it and laid it gently on the horse's back. The horse did not flinch, only once tossed his head when Duncan tightened the girth. Because for several days Duncan had been saddling him to get him used to it.

"Don't you worry about my behind."

"Ain't worrying me none. You the one best be worrying. Look at that eye. Wasn't for that eye I wouldn't mind trying him myself." His face matched Logan's, in color and expression. In them both there was the same look as before, almost festive with anticipation. It was pleasant to see on Logan. For so long a time there had been that strange and unprovoked reserve which broke down only before Duncan's deliberate efforts. Now his face was bright. His lips were parted slightly over the yellow teeth. He looked at the horse, and then at Duncan.

The horse stood now with monumental indifference. He had a way of seeming blind to everyone around him; everyone except Duncan. And there were times when he seemed insensible even to Duncan's presence. This was one of them. He looked out into the sunlight and blinked. Only his ears moved, barely, half-alert, as though at some distant sound that human ears could not hear. He was like an old horse then, old and wise.

"Hold him," Duncan said.

"You better take him outside," Logan said.

"Here's a horseshoe," Wesley said. "You want to carry that."

"He'll be all right in here," Duncan said.

The stirrup was high. The horse was taller than he seemed. Very slowly, inching, gripping the horse's mane and the cantle of the saddle, Duncan hoisted his body. The horse stirred. He glanced back. Then he wheeled half around.

"Hold him," Duncan said.

"We is holding," Wesley said.

Duncan started all over again. This time he accomplished it. He sat in the saddle looking down into their faces.

"He right quiet," Logan said.

"He just resting up," Wesley said.

"Lead him out."

Logan led him out of the door and once around the barn lot. Chief walked a little stiffly, but his quietness surprised them all.

"Turn him loose."

Still the horse walked quietly, stiffly. Until he reached the fence. He stopped. He would not turn. Duncan urged him with his voice. He pressed his heels into Chief's sides, once, then again. He felt the horse's body go rigid suddenly. He felt between his knees a kind of muted quivering, as though of an explosion somewhere underground. The horse's movement was like an eruption. Duncan seemed to be entirely clear of the saddle, to land in it again only by luck after an interval in the air. The landing was like a blow at the base of his spine, all one with the snap of his teeth, the instantly foggy eye, the grunting recoil of the horse before he lunged again. It was not stiff-legged bucking; it was in one motion rearing and plunging over a high invisible barrier. He was conscious of a confusion of sounds—thuds, grunts, his own and Chief's, Wesley's voice, wild, seemingly wordless. Now he had lost half of the bridle. He clutched at the swirling mane. Each of those blows at his spine was a blinding shock to his eyeballs. He could no longer tell even which way he was facing. Every blurred vision of the barn, the Negroes, the fence, was a brief convulsive waking up from jarring instants of sleep. Still he

held on. He felt himself flinching at the uprushing ground, the blow to come; yet strangely welcoming it. Then all but the blows was forgotten. He was a victim; he was there to suffer them for as long as they should last. And he wanted to. But his balance was gone. He made one last attempt to right himself. Then he felt his body suspended in air, like a rest, like a break in motion. Even the jarring strike of the earth seemed only another no more punishing than those which came before.

"Oh, Jesus," Wesley said.

"Is you hurt, Mr. Duncan?" Logan had stooped down beside him. Duncan shook his head and got up. He felt numb.

"You done mighty good," Logan said. "I ain't never seen a horse take on so. Squat and jump. Just like a frog."

"I told you," Wesley said. "All you got to do is look at that eye. Old Satan hisself got a eye just like that."

Standing there in the fence corner, tossing his head, he was no trouble to catch. Nor was he any trouble to mount, this time.

"You look out. That horse hurt you." Logan led the horse a few steps and released him.

"Like before," Wesley said. "Heading for that fence. Place to break that horse is a hayloft."

Duncan sat crouched in the saddle, waiting. Chief moved tediously, as though he were measuring the distance to the fence. With part of his mind Duncan listened almost gratefully to Wesley's voice saying: "Look at that horse thinking. No telling what he got in his head this time. He liable—"

For all Duncan's concentration it came unexpectedly. Chief reared and lunged. He was suddenly running. The fence was coming at them. Too quick even to be afraid he saw, did not feel, the horse rise and the fence, the ground, drop under them; felt only the shock of the earth upspringing against the horse's hoofs again. And they were running, ahead, no place, like wind through the pasture. The grass swept under them, one unbroken smear of vivid green. Chief's body went level and smooth, like a projectile over his working legs. The herd of sheep exploded from their path in a mottle of gray and yellow chaos. Gradually Duncan drew tight the left-hand rein. He drew the horse

into a long flying arc that carried them onto a hillside. Here Chief labored against the slope. His body bowed and heaved between Duncan's legs. Near the top he had slowed to little more than a canter.

But the hillside did not break his run, as Duncan had thought it would. Once on the ridge, on the old wagon road, his wind came back to him. Then, for all Duncan's strength, he got his head down again. They were fleeing along a channel of timber where to either side tree trunks flitted like so many dark fingers swept past the tail of the eye; through shadows, through spears and pools of light that splashed in his face. There were curves still slick from recent rain where only his held breath seemed to keep them upright. Still the horse did not tire. Until at last the beat of his hoofs became an all-absorbing monotony, a flying trajectory of sound through a place where silence was absolute and speeding half-formed images ceased to register on his mind.

They had passed out of the timber and into open fields of grain before the horse began to tire. Duncan turned him into a soggy field of rye where his hoofs sank to his fetlocks, and made a half-circle onto the road again. Chief was only cantering now, heavily. His breath labored, and lather and dark patches of sweat were on his neck and shoulders. He would have slowed to a walk then, but Duncan pushed him on, toward home now, in that same spent and hard-working canter.

They were in the timber, walking. It seemed a snail's pace. His heart had not yet slowed to the rhythm of a walk, and his face, no longer cooled by the wind, tingled with the heat of his blood. The whole of Chief's body was shades darker with sweat. But even this gasping, heart-winded exhaustion could not make him drop his head. At times he tossed it, showering his mane, in a kind of restless though impotent pride.

"You can toss it if you want to," Duncan said aloud. "But you're conquered . . . in spite of your heart. And we'll travel . . . this whole country." He laid his hand on the horse's neck, the hot stinging brine.

They did not go back the same way. They followed a road, a trail, which led to the hilltop above Logan's cabin. The horse had regained his wind. He walked steadily, with

greater speed. Duncan could feel the lick now, the rhythmic and heavy four-time beat of his hoofs. His head had begun to nod; a brief nod, but sharp; a motion that would increase, accelerate, until in time it would come to resemble the rise and fall of the arm that wields a hammer. Once, when he stumbled in a rut that crossed the road, the horse broke and started to run. This time Duncan hauled him down. He had fallen into his gait again before they reached the end of the ridge.

The farm lay below them, green, soundless, unstimulating with sheep that seemed only posed in the act of grazing. It was like a land sunken long ago at the very height of spring, invisible beyond this brink, upon which some hunter on these ridges might wander with mute surprise. The graveyard was here, in need of tending again. All the graves were knee-high in weeds with savage yellow blooms. The place saddened him; the more so when he remembered that one moment, like a gap out of time, in which he, just a boy, stood here with his father and grandfather, gazing into the valley. Gazing at what, he did not know, but all the same struck with reverence. Now, even Chief stood quiet. Duncan touched his neck. Finally the horse moved off of his own accord. Duncan angled him carefully down the slope.

The initial breaking was not entirely accomplished. Several times more the horse tried to throw him; once with those same punishing and determined plunges he had used on that first morning. This time, in an agony of muscles already drawn taut with soreness, Duncan rode it out. But in less than a week Chief had quit resisting with any violence. He was still given to bumptiousness, displays of bad manners. He would shy away from the saddle. Once when he was tied he reared back and broke the leather and escaped into the pasture. More serious were brief and unexpected displays of that viciousness which before had bothered Duncan. He was liable to kick at anyone but his master. One day when Wesley came near, the horse bit at him with an unquestionable intention to injure. The snap of his teeth on empty air was as sharp as the springing of a steel trap. For the first time Duncan put real meaning into the lash he gave him with the crop. Chief reared back.

Then he stood strangely, rigidly still. Duncan did not hit him again. The horse particularly hated the sheep. To see them panic and scramble out of his path infuriated him. Duncan had to lean straining against the bridle to keep him from charging them. Even when the distance was impossible he would kick at the sheep so hard that his whole body jerked and the joints of his leg popped with a muted but brittle report.

Still, he learned fast. Unusually fast. He had in their fullness the instincts of a horse whose blood long before he inherits it has been trained to a special calling. And he had, besides, the benefit of all the affectionate care which Duncan had given him since his birth. By nature his mouth was not tender. Yet he developed early a remarkable sensitiveness to the bridle. After the first few days it was necessary only in the horse's erratic moments to pull him into a turn. The gentlest pull, almost a touch, at this or that rein was enough. He did not simply endure the bit in his mouth; he carried it, used it, as naturally as he used his eyes. The result was that Duncan did not have to be always checking him back, raising his head to make him gather himself together. In a matter of weeks he had gained that disciplined yet supple carriage which for most horses took several months of steady work.

At first Duncan's rides scarcely took him beyond the boundaries of the farm; never further than the ridges immediately surrounding them. He worked the horse on all kinds of terrain. Besides level ground he took him on rough hillsides, made him walk jagged gullies and fresh-plowed fields that taxed his wind and muscles. He laid out on the ground a gauntlet of fence rails all parallel and several feet apart. Time after time he made the horse retrace his steps over the rail-crossed path. All these things Duncan's grandfather had taught him. They developed the habit of sureness in the horse's feet. They required of the horse's legs that perfectly square and economical pattern of motion which the true-gaited walking horse must have. They made strong those muscles needed for the running walk, so that once they were developed, this gait, even when executed at its fastest, came easier than any other. It all came back to Duncan as he went on with the breaking. Every day or so when a new difficulty confronted

him, some old forgotten piece of advice, or some alternative solution would come into his mind. His own knowledge surprised him. He found himself almost able to anticipate the various subtle phases, the always changing faults which the horse passed through. As his touch became more sensitive, his own expertness too began to surprise him. It all came to have a familiar feel, like something that had been rehearsed in an almost forgotten past.

As the horse grew accustomed to the work Duncan lengthened the rides. Because a walking horse ought to be ridden until he was tired, more than tired. Only then would he hit the gait to perfection and burn all its habits finally into his muscles. But the rides and all the careful grooming he gave the horse were taking too much time. Though he started early it would always be late in the morning before he got to work. Sometimes it would be noon. Logan did not say anything. But he never had been able to hide disapproval, even when he wanted to. He did not want to now. He and Wesley were setting tobacco, they needed help. Logan was not young any more. He still worked steadily but slow. And the task, repeated all day long, of bending down to peg the earth and slip the plant in and pull the dirt to its roots was hard on him. It made him silent. At least silent most of the time when Duncan was there. Still, this was nothing new. It was not all to be laid to Duncan's neglect. Rather it was true, perhaps, that his neglect was only more incentive for Logan's now-familiar reserve. Duncan was not sure why. Unless it was that Logan had in his head some ideal which Duncan did not live up to, some unfavorable comparison of him with the Welshes who came before. Now this neglect only said to Logan that his father and his grandfather would not have done so. Duncan determined each time to cut the length of his rides. But it was always the same. He kept on postponing the end until he could dismount with the feeling that he had given the horse the kind of workout he should have.

So that he had a mixed reaction to what happened next. Bantam came back. Duncan was the first one to see him. It was midmorning and he was riding down the road toward the front gate. He was close before he glanced ahead and saw the figure approaching. Bantam walked in a kind

of loose slouch. He was dressed in the remains of what must have been once a certain seedy splendor. It was hard to tell now just what color the outfit had been . . . the coat lavender, perhaps, the trousers yellow. It was frayed and torn and spotted here and there with dark or bleached-out stains. It no longer had any shape of its own; the wide wings of the coat fell brokenly over the points of his shoulders. But it was all intact. Even the colorless nearly naked spine of what had been a feather still protruded, along with a pair of matches, from the brim of his battered hat.

But Bantam stood very straight in it all while Duncan talked to him. He had raised up out of his slouch when they approached each other. He was taller than Wesley and Logan. He resembled them both in the color and the cut of his face, but he was handsomer than either one. Or had been handsomer, Duncan observed, before this something unpleasant had got into his expression. It was a look somehow mixed of hunger and contempt. It gave a nervous twist to one corner of his mouth and a certain overbold, almost glassy stare to his eyes. He rarely looked up at Duncan's face above him on the horse. Then it was by glances which seemed not so much to drop before Duncan's gaze as simply to fall away, as though in scorn, as though by that one glance he had seen all there was to see. He stood gazing apparently at Duncan's hip, because it happened to fall on a level with his eyes. He never looked at the horse.

At first Duncan would have tried to shake hands with him. But immediately he saw that that was all over. Still he made half an effort to be friendly.

"I didn't know you at first. It's been a long time."

"Yeah," Bantam said.

Duncan paused. "You back for good?"

"Naw. I ain't here but for a short time." Several tortured "r's" obtruded from his speech. "I going back in a couple days."

"To New York?"

"Yeah."

Duncan fingered the crop in his hand. He was not trying to be friendly any more. He was just coldly curious, more curious than he was angry at Bantam's impudence.

Yet he needed only to corroborate what he had long ago certainly guessed.

"You live in Harlem?"

"I wouldn't live no place else."

"Are you working?"

"I works some . . . when I feels like it."

Duncan rolled the crop between his fingers. This was foolish; his anger was in the ascendant now.

"Maybe you ought to work more often. You're looking kind of poor." As he said it he touched up Chief and was already moving away before Bantam could reply. Then, louder, without looking back, interrupting whatever Bantam's answer was, he said, "Logan and Wesley are in the tobacco."

The conversation left him feeling unpleasant for hours. He did not want Bantam there at all, with his insolence, his restlessness, running on to Wesley and Logan about his half-understood emancipated ideas, about the tyranny of the white man, about New York. He probably understood just enough to brand them "Uncle Toms." It would be just that way. His very presence there was like a threat to Duncan's peace. From the moment that Duncan had left him behind on the road, had let him pass physically between himself and the others back there at work, he had a sense of being cut off abruptly from a communion to which he had a right. It would continue without him, this communion, altered by novelties strange to him, into which he could not enter. And it was not for only a couple of days. Bantam had come back not to visit, but in hunger and in poverty and because, temporarily, he had reached the point of exhaustion in that aimless restless search after something that would always be denied him. He had come home like a dog from a spree. He would stay, how long? Until he grew fat again. Until, here in this isolation, his strength and his restlessness gained the force to fling him out into the world again. Then he would go with the old unwary confidence almost undimmed. There was nothing to do about it; he was Logan's son. There was only this: that he would work for his feed, or go hungry. Logan would not stand for his idling. And this was something, at a period when part-time help was hard to get at any price. Then Duncan would be free for what he wanted

most to do. He could even increase the length of his rides. This way he need have little to do with them all until after Bantam had gone.

As Duncan expected, Logan asked him the next day if he would hire Bantam (Logan called him Herman) for a spell. Duncan agreed readily, if not without regret. He wanted to say something else to Logan then, but he could not think of anything that would do. He watched Logan walk away from the barn, hobbling a little. He turned back to his task of rubbing Chief down with a cloth.

He no longer stayed close to the farm on his rides. Chief had reached the stage when he needed to travel distances. Duncan took a different route each day. Sometimes they passed the Jordan place. Then Chief would become difficult because of the horses there. His head would come up until his ears were on a level with Duncan's eyes. He would sound that long vibrant bugle note of the stallion. Several times Duncan had to fight him past the gate that led to Jordan's stable. Once Jordan's stud was in plain view, loose in the paddock. He reared high, flashing dull gold in the sun, and cried his challenge. Chief understood instinctively. This time Duncan had to dismount and whip him past the gate. It was remarkable, this furious maleness in a horse so young. Duncan rode him past often, just for the discipline. After a while he had broken him of all but the bugling.

Duncan rode for miles in all directions from the farm. He avoided Brady and he avoided main highways, because the horse was afraid of automobiles. Even violently afraid. When one came upon him at any considerable speed he shied or reared and tried to run away. Once, in panic, he cut squarely in front of a truck and barely missed being hit. Duncan kept as much as he could to wagon trails and back roads where traffic was infrequent.

Often he rode to Aunt Virgy's. He had forgiven her long ago. If, indeed, there was anything to forgive. She was always pathetically glad to see him. If she really did see him . . . he could not tell for sure. She had grown suddenly much blinder in the past year. But she still came to the door and glared out at him with that stiff and paradoxical mockery of a smile when he called to her from the saddle. Each time she praised the horse anew in the same

words: "That the old horse come back again. Like as two peas, they is."

Her eyes glared. Where they were focused it was impossible to tell. Duncan sat there on the horse and talked to her for a few minutes. At times, always to her great pleasure, he brought some bright and inconsequential gift.

The weather grew hot and dry. In spite of Chief's strength the heat was hard on him. Duncan began to ride twice a day for briefer periods, early and late when the air was cooler. Then he began to ride at night whenever there was moon enough. He liked this best. It was cool and still. On bright nights roosters crowed in the distance. Now and then he passed a moon-flooded field where an invisible mockingbird was singing. Except for these, and for stock grazing dreamily, the countryside lay in sleep. Of all things the stillest were the houses, under roofs of bleached milky shingle or gleaming tin. Darkest were the blinded windows revealing the moonless night inside. Chief walked as he did at no other time. He hardly needed correction. His head, rising, falling, as though cut from under the heavy pale-gold spray of his foretop, counted out the beat for each powerful thrust of his stride. His body beneath the saddle flowed like the gentle rhythmic flexion of one enormous muscle. The fall of his hoofs, muted on the dusty road, seemed to Duncan after a while to set the time, the pace, that his own blood kept. Even to be somehow the cause of its pulsing, as though his heart might stop with the cessation of those hoofs. They passed under clumps of trees through shade that lay black on the ground. They came out onto soft bright-yellow stretches of road where sometimes he could see their shadow, very pale, gliding beside them over the dust.

Once, during the time of the full moon, he circled past Brady and crossed over the river bridge. He climbed the long grade and passed the game preserve and turned north down into that desolate stretch of country. The trail soon vanished, but there were clearings where the moon fell on an almost solid floor of chert and rock. The clearings opened into one another down a narrow hollow that always threatened to close in front of him. Chief's shoes rang in this stone-quiet silence. At the mouth of the hollow Duncan pulled him up. Ahead, on uneven ground

guttured with sinks and gushes like old wounds healed over but never filled, was a thicket. It was sparse, dwarfish, largely composed of the dead and bone-gray skeletons of trees. Here and there a bleached trunk stood as though strangled in the confusion of its own recoiled and twisted roots. Among the ribbed and crisscrossed shadows white chunks and ledges of rock stood out bare to the moon. Duncan sat for a time gazing at the sight. Chief was very still under him. Until, with a small start of his body, the horse's head, his ears, went up. Duncan listened. The sound, whatever it was, had been too fine for a man to hear. Chief began to paw, sprinkling bits of chirt behind them. Duncan turned him and went back the way they had come.

Sometimes on these rides he stopped off and talked a little while with Aaron. Duncan had learned a strange thing about him. Aaron never seemed to sleep. At least not to really sleep, though he must have dozed, off and on. At any time of the night—and it would be late when Duncan came during the dark of the moon—a pale light could be seen through his window and through the chinks in the log wall. The lamp always sat there on the table amid a few dishes, burning. Usually Aaron would be sitting shirtless on the rotten steps with the light falling on that rubble heap of a porch behind him. The dog would be lying at his feet. Apparently he sat there most of the night, not even whittling, just sitting, gazing. This was part of the reason, perhaps, why his eyes had that unusual yellow and luminous look, like a cat or an owl whose eyes are made for the darkness. Duncan wondered if he ever really stretched out and slept on that cot inside, that ragged mattress as bare of any cover as the floor. Duncan had once asked him when he slept. He had said simply:

"I doze along. I don't sleep much of a night."

He was glad whenever Duncan came. He was always the first to call his greeting. It followed abruptly, like a startling change of voice, the subdued and brief and houndish bay of the dog. His voice sounded different than at any other time. His greeting had always a warm masculine ring. Except on one single night, a night when for brief intervals the moon was clouded over and vision at any distance was uncertain. Duncan had come from the direction opposite to the usual one. For some reason the dog

did not bay. This time Aaron's greeting had a quality tentative and strained. And something more. Maybe it was only that Duncan heard his voice, as it were, naked, stripped of the dog's accustomed preface. He would have thought it was fear he heard in the voice if Aaron had seemed capable of fear.

This night the dog and Aaron greeted him as usual. He dismounted and, holding the reins, squatted a few steps from where Aaron sat. Tonight there was something purposeful in Aaron's manner. The reflected light of the moon went off and on beneath the deliberate dropping of his lids. In this light his eyes were not yellow; they had the green pallor of ice in certain angles of the sun.

"I aim to make a run about Friday night. You want to come?"

Duncan toyed with the reins, thinking how on Friday night there would still be a good moon.

"You might like it . . . riding right by them police and such," Aaron said. "I got a good load. You can have a piece of the money."

"I can't, Friday," Duncan said. He sensed Aaron's disappointment. He thought that actually he would enjoy the run in much the same way that Aaron would. But it seemed an unnecessary disruption. He was too contented with the rut in which he was moving to risk disturbing things. "I'd like to sometime, though. Let me know when you go again."

"Liable to be a good while," Aaron said.

They were both quiet for a little.

"You know what you ought to do?" Aaron said. The moonlight went off, then on in his eyes. His pause was full of eagerness. "You ought to come in on this here still of mine. Two of us together'd run off three, four times what I do by myself. It don't need to even look funny, you going off a heap. You gone the best part the time anyhow, now you got that uppity nigger down there."

"That's just for a while," Duncan said. "He's bound to leave pretty soon."

"We could work of a night. Have us a big fire down there in that hollow. Wouldn't make no difference whether it was summer or winter. And plenty of that whisky to keep us warm of a cold night." He stood up suddenly. "Come

up here. I want to show you something." He stepped up onto the porch and waited, looking down at Duncan.

Duncan stood up.

"You'll have to turn loose of that." He indicated the horse. It struck Duncan then that he had never done so before, that he had never acknowledged by a single word even the existence of the horse. Duncan might as well have come on foot each time for all the notice that Aaron had ever appeared to take of Chief.

Duncan tied the horse and climbed onto the porch. Aaron was standing at the door with a large wooden box he had fished out of the rubble. He went in to the cot and set the box down. The hinges were made of leather. The top was held shut by a cord bound once around the box. Aaron slipped it off easily. He took out a stuffed five-pound flour sack, untied the knotted mouth and turned it upside down over the cot.

"God a'mighty," Duncan said, "how much is it?" The bills lay in a heap on the cot, like so much waste paper. He saw a sprinkling of fives and tens, and even a couple of twenties.

"I don't know. I ain't never counted it." He paused. "They's a plenty more where that come from. Whisky's a paying business."

Duncan contemplated the money. "What are you going to do with it all?"

Aaron eyed it disinterestedly. "I'll bust out and spend her one of these days."

"What on?"

"Something'll come up, I reckon. Anyhow, ain't no man but likes to have aplenty money. A heap of things can't be got no other way. Like women. Some of them." He looked at Duncan. His eyes in the lamplight were yellow again. But when he spoke next his voice lacked conviction. It was like an argument in which he had suddenly lost faith. "You come in and I'll go half with you. I'll beat that. I'll buy all of what we need and you won't have to do nothing but help make . . . and run it."

Duncan was embarrassed.

Aaron said, "You're so set on horses. You can get you a whole gang of horses. I'll cut you in on this here too, if you need it." He gestured toward the money.

"I couldn't do that," Duncan said.

Aaron was silent. He leaned down and slowly began stuffing the money into the sack. "It ain't just this here," he said. "It's a satisfaction besides. It ain't like planting no tobacco and them government bastards bossing the job telling you how much you got to raise, else you can set and chew it up all by yourself. That's for a man to say. Don't nobody tell me my business."

Duncan hesitated, but not out of indecision. It was hard to say no to Aaron. Then suddenly he was relieved by the commotion Chief was raising. He hurried out and untied the restless horse. After a moment Aaron followed. Duncan could see a part of the money still lying on the cot by the open sack. Aaron stood there watching Duncan. With a motion abrupt and decisive, he sat down on the steps. He did not speak. Now he did not appear to expect even a refusal. The immobility, the silence he kept were like the release come of a sudden trance; they seemed to leave him unmindful that Duncan had never answered; disarmed, even, as though he might be startled by the sound of Duncan's voice. Aaron was gazing toward him, toward the horse, perhaps; Aaron and the dog, like sharers in a single quandary which all but robbed their eyes of the power of vision. Just this way, night after night, he with only his dog must sit out all those hours until dawn. The thought arrested Duncan in what he was going to say. He pondered the man a second, face to face, as though the eyes that gazed at him were blind. When he turned away and looked across at the moon, setting now over the ragged tops of the pines, he had with him the vivid sense of a loneliness that merely in itself was almost terrifying. Mechanically he passed the bridle over Chief's head. He turned to Aaron as he spoke:

"I'd be glad to help you out sometime . . . when you're pushed."

Aaron's eyes glimmered into focus. He did not answer. Duncan waited. He raised his foot into the stirrup, then slowly mounted onto the creaking leather.

"Why don't you take my truck Friday night. It'll save you that extra trip to Nashville and back."

"I'm obliged to you," Aaron said. He did not stir, but his voice was warm. Duncan turned the horse and rode

off. When he glanced back the two of them were as before, mute, half in shadow, unstirring as images in the last light of the slanting moon.

In August the county fair was held. There was to be a horse show. Duncan studied for weeks before whether or not he should enter Chief. He was afraid of Chief's reaction to all the horses and people and automobiles. But he decided to, finally. Chief was much more settled now. He was still frightened but at least he was no longer terrified by a passing automobile. And he could walk with relative calm past horses in a field adjacent to the road. Duncan drilled him in this, deliberately passing lots where horses were, making Chief stand while mares nickered from across the fence. Two weeks before the show Duncan taught him to canter. Chief tried to run at first, but he caught on quickly. By the day of the show he could execute the gait without excitement and with a competence that was promising.

The show was to be at three o'clock. Duncan got to the fairgrounds at one. As he approached the gate Chief's manner changed abruptly. His body went tense. He raised his head and bugled. Duncan brought the crop down hard on his neck. The horse's head pitched higher still, with annoyance rather than fright. In front of them, headed against a fence, a row of trucks stood with spaces between where horses were tied. Men both white and colored stood grooming the horses or puttering about the trucks or talking together in bunches. In a clear place between the trucks and the ring a number of horses worked back and forth, their riders absorbed and professional, in jodhpurs; or else self-conscious, in jeans, squinting straight ahead in the bright sun, or furtively at lookers-on. The horses, like their riders, ran to extremes. One, a common bleached-out bay, had harness scars still on his shoulders. All of his owner's vigorous last-minute currying had failed to bring even a suggestion of gloss to the sunburned hide. At intervals the horse responded lethargically to the angry heels of his rider. Then there was the other extreme, the minority, topped by the gelding Jordan rode. His tail was set and padded probably with artificial hair. The elegance of his coat suggested the sheen of finished mahogany, and his

gait had that professional movement that only a fulltime trainer could give it.

As Duncan looked Jordan turned out of the clearing and moved in his direction. Duncan hoped he would pass. Instead, a few paces away, he reined in his horse abruptly, neatly, like a soldier coming to attention. Chief, already pawing, grew still more restive at the nearness of the horse. Jordan eyed him silently, with that insolence which perhaps he was not even capable of removing from his face. The new-fledged squire, Duncan thought with bitterness. He looked away, tried to concentrate on spotting his truck.

"Who's his sire?" Jordan said.

"Mountain Boy," Duncan said, still looking away toward the trucks.

"Never heard of him," Jordan said. "What can he do? Let's see him work."

"He can jump through a hoop," Duncan said. "You got one on you?"

With some muttered obscenity Jordan spurred his horse. A passing Negro had to leap out of his path, and stood looking after him, cursing under his breath.

Logan stood near the far end of the row of trucks. He was beckoning.

"I told you to get off from the rest of them," Duncan said.

"We was off. They come in on us," Wesley said.

Bantam was there. He was leaning against a fender, purling cigarette smoke between his lips. He had on a new outfit, gaudy, with trousers like pantaloons. In one way this was a good sign. But still, he was here; and his presence inspired that chill among them that Duncan had hoped to escape today—he and Logan and Wesley alone, consulting, fussing about the horse, swapping suggestions and strategies. Instead, they were on their guard. Wesley most of all. His movements had a kind of lethargy that seemed deliberate. Slowly he unbuckled the girth and slid the saddle off and laid it down like something fragile on the bed of the truck. He took up a cloth and turned to the horse and began to rub abstractedly. Duncan, plaiting Chief's foretop, watched him with irritation.

"Are you tired, Wesley?" he asked.

"I ain't tired."

"If you are, just stop."

Carelessly Bantam flipped his cigarette away. It flew in a long arc over the fence and landed in the dry grass.

"You better stomp that. Might start a grass fire," Duncan said.

"That grass won't burn," Bantam said. "Too much green in it."

"You better stomp it anyway."

Bantam did not move. "That's barbwire," he said.

With an effort Duncan kept on braiding the foretop. "Go around then . . . if you can't climb it."

Suddenly Wesley laid down the cloth. "I'll get it. Herman liable tear his new suit."

Duncan restrained the answer that had come to his lips. Logan's face was troubled. He had picked up the cloth, was solemnly rubbing the horse.

"A heap of them here, Mr. Duncan. Ain't never been like this before."

The number of horses working in the lot had swelled. Now and then another horse, one of them quite stylish, moved in and went to work. Dust rose in the horses' wakes. Now a cloud like haze hung over the lot. The hum of voices, interrupted by shouts, the nicker of a horse, the growling engine of a truck, increased with every minute. People, singly and in twos and threes, wandered past the truck, stopped to gaze at the horses, talking, pointing. Chief was pawing again. At intervals he pitched his head and snatched the foretop out of Duncan's hand. Duncan wiped the sweat from his forehead. He looked out at the mounting confusion.

"He be all right, Mr. Duncan," Logan said. "Don't you worry none about this horse."

The gleam of sympathy in his eyes and voice was comforting. However deeply it might be hidden at times, the ancient loyalty was in him still, for always, as ineradicable as his heart. Though he was the last, probably; possessed of a peculiar virtue which would end with him, which in its purity he could not pass down. Certainly not to the likes of Bantam. Not even to Wesley, who, in Bantam's presence, now avoided even the honorific "Mister" which before had come as naturally as Duncan's name.

"You better be worrying." Bantam spoke up abruptly. He looked at Logan while he spoke, "That's one mean horse. You can tell that from looking at that eye."

"You don't know nothing about this horse," Logan said.

"I know when a horse try to bite me . . . like this one done. He run against that door trying to get at me."

"Now you know how to keep away from him," Duncan said.

"I know it's a good thing for him he didn't," Bantam said.

Duncan's hands stopped. His lip was curling. He saw Logan's eyes, suddenly white, glancing first at his face, then at Bantam.

"You hush up, Bantam," Logan said. "That ain't no way to talk."

Bantam took out another cigarette.

"You better ride him some more, Mr. Duncan. Get him used to them other horses before he get in that ring." He picked up the bridle. "You, Wesley, put that saddle on."

No one spoke. Wesley came forward and picked up the saddle. His face looked sullen. Bantam lit the cigarette and flipped the match and watched it fall into the grass beyond the fence. He turned his head and watched Wesley tighten the girth. Only a twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed his outer calm. Duncan mounted up out of the silence.

"Give me the crop," he said. "And tighten that chin strap."

Chief nickered as he approached the horses. Duncan reminded him with the crop high up on his neck. Between his knees the horse's muscles were as tense as if in the grip of cramps. Chief moved forward slowly but with a kind of fierce and wasted action of his legs. Duncan hit him again. He waited until there was a broad space between the nearest horses. Then he moved into the clearing, keeping his distance from the rest. Slowly the horse loosened up a little. Now, at least, he was mocking his gait. Duncan breathed easier.

Suddenly, across on the other side of the show ring, the carnival came to life with a burst of the calliope. Chief stiffened again. A barker's voice rose. The air became a chaos of sounds converging here from every side: music;

and voices rasping and murmurous and shouting; the grinding motors of carnival rides and trucks; the low uncadenced thud of hoofs. The pressure Duncan kept on the reins held the horse's neck in a bow. Chief's legs were dancing in a kind of confused and arrested slow gait. Other horses were coming up, passing them. A big sorrel mare came close enough to touch. Chief tried to stay with her. Harder than ever Duncan set the bit. Chief reared, then went on struggling forward against the bridle. He was not growing calmer, as Duncan had expected. It was turning into a battle. Duncan's arms ached with the strain. He became aware that people were watching, shouting advice, shouting taunts like "ride 'm cowboy." Then someone close beside him was saying, "That's a new gait, ain't it, Welsh? Who'd you say sired him?" It was Jordan moving past, leering at him. The gelding he rode walked on with an obvious and deep-nodding stride that rapidly opened the distance between them. Yet Chief could beat him, even now, even as a two-year-old. In the fit of rage that seized him, Duncan brought down the crop with all his strength across Chief's flank. What happened next left him with only two impressions: that of the horse's head above him, falling backward; and his own lunge as he left the saddle.

He was sitting on the ground. He could still hear the ring of that crimson blinding explosion that had happened behind his eyes. The shapes around him were people. They looked a little tremulous, unsubstantial. He was conscious that Chief had fallen with him, that he was not there any more.

"Easy, boy. They'll get him. They got him run in a corner now."

Duncan threw off the restraining hand and got to his feet. He staggered momentarily. Someone took his arm. He could not see very well, and he drew his hand across his eye. He noticed blood on it.

"You better set down," the man said. "They'll get him."

Then his sight cleared. He spotted Chief. The horse was in the fence corner, but his manner said that he was a long way from being caught. In that moment he stood motionless and high-headed, as though studying the semi-circle of men that was tightening as it advanced. Then

with a golden swirl of his mane he pitched his head violently. He reared and came down and dug at the ground with his hoof.

"They better look out, that's a bad horse," someone said in back of Duncan.

Duncan started forward. Logan was at his elbow, saying, "You better set down a while, Mr. Duncan. They get him."

The distance seemed great. His legs would not hurry; they seemed absurdly unable to outstrip the time set by that tireless mechanical music. He saw that the men had stopped advancing. They were watching a man on a horse who moved slowly past them into the corner where Chief stood pawing. The man rode a small claybank mare. He eased her forward, extending his hand in readiness to seize the horse's bridle. Chief had quit pawing. He stood with his neck bowed. Any movement he made was of his distended nostrils which even at that distance showed like hollow wounds. Duncan felt it coming. He called out. He tried to run and nearly fell. He saw one of the men turned toward him. Even the man on the little mare seemed to waver. Then it was too late.

Chief's head was where the man's body had been, rising. He appeared to be trying simply to run over the mare, to crush her out of his path. She struggled under his weight, nickered. Around them shouts from the men went up. A few of them moved forward, gesturing, yelling. Something sailed through the air and glanced off the horse's back. Suddenly the mare was down. A piece of plank struck the horse's neck. He reared. He came down hard on the mare with his hoofs. The yelling grew wilder. Other objects, rocks, sticks of wood, were in the air. Duncan ran toward the horse. It was then Chief lunged forward, passed him. The crowd split as though from a sudden cannon shot. The yelling rose down the length of the row of trucks. A trail of dust followed the horse's path in a straight line toward the gate. But a truck blocked the opening. A pillow of dust clouded upward where the horse bounced to a halt and wheeled and started back, circling away from the trucks.

Duncan was running with no more purpose than the rest. He was waving the crop that magically was still in his

hand. Several times he heard his voice calling the horse's name. He saw a man stagger up out of the trail of dust and another man run to him and the first one screaming, "God damn him, God damn him." He saw a man holding a pistol. He had a silver badge on his shirt. His face looked raw and blunt, like a haunch of meat. He was lumbering after the horse. Then Duncan was running toward him with all his strength. Another man got to him first and grabbed his shoulder and jerked him to a halt that made his jaw quiver. "Damn fool. Want to kill somebody?" The deputy was cursing him back when Duncan moved out of earshot.

The horse had circled the area. The place was a chaos of dust and men and horses; it was like a battlefield which the enemy had just now swept over. This time on his circle the horse came to the gate of the show ring. He angled abruptly and turned in. The ring emptied as if a bomb had exploded inside, propelling men headlong under the wooden rail. For the first time somebody thought. A man ran up and closed the gate. The horse circled the ring. He was heading for the gate again. It seemed at first that he would crash it. The waving hands vanished. The men recoiled, running or stumbling backward. But the horse pulled up in time. He went around once more, the flaxen tail streaming out behind him. He slowed to a canter, then to a long high trot. The trot did not taper down to a walk, it broke off into a sudden dramatic halt that left him stiffly erect and poised, like the statue of a general's horse alone near the center of the ring. Then he raised his head higher still and gave out that long bugle note. For a space of several seconds it cut through, silenced even the eternal and shrill calliope that again flooded the ring after his breath was exhausted. Now, ducking under the rail, in spite of all those eyes beginning to turn upon him, Duncan thought how beautiful Chief was, and that all those eyes must see it too. Again he thought of that horse which Jehovah had described to Job, whose neck was clothed with thunder, which paweth in the valley and goeth on to meet the armed men.

The horse saw him the instant he came into the ring. After that he did not appear to notice Duncan any more. He stood alert and tossed his muzzle, as though in uncertainty and defiance of the crowd that had gathered along

the rail. Duncan could feel their eyes, their tension. In his own face he could feel the blush of humiliation and anger. He wanted it over with, but he dare not move fast. Again it occurred to him that his steps kept not his own time but the time of that maddening calliope which through all the different tunes never changed a jot. Suddenly he was struck with the memory of the tune that was playing now. It was "Over the Waves." He remembered the boy's corpse across the old man's shoulder.

The horse did not shy back when Duncan approached him. It was as though the hand that reached out and caught the broken rein had taken him by surprise. And the crowd too. They had expected, wanted something. Their voices which had been quiet until then sounded with their disappointment. Duncan walked as fast as he could with the horse. The wisecracks had started again. Some of them reached him clearly as he passed down the wide aisle that opened through the crowd. A number of men and boys followed him back to the truck. His head ached. He felt the dried blood, like a scab on the side of his face.

In the half-shelter the truck afforded, Duncan fixed the rein. Logan would not look at him directly. He was silent and he kept his back to the group that stood watching and talking a little way off. He waited until Duncan had finished with the rein. Then he said:

"That mare got a broke leg."

"Who does she belong to?" Duncan mumbled.

"Mr. Sam Grover."

"He was a damn fool." Duncan picked up the crop and mounted the horse.

Bantam had come up with Wesley in tow. Bantam leaned on the truck again. He took out a cigarette and a match and struck the match on the fender beside his leg. Without looking up from the flame, he said, "Here come that damn fool now."

Duncan looked first at Bantam. Bantam's absorption in the flame did not hide that twitch at the corners of his mouth, that expression of malice attempting to mask as irony.

Then Duncan looked at Grover. Grover stopped before he spoke, close to Bantam, a long step away from the horse. He was a big man, running to fat, with a bluff swarthy

face. He had on jeans and a blue cotton shirt with the collar buttoned tight around his neck. His hat was dusty. There was dirt on his cheek and a small cut under the cheekbone. His face showed nothing before he spoke, in a tenor voice that did not suit him. Then the anger flashed in his eyes. "My mare's leg's broke. I got to shoot her."

Duncan looked straight at him a moment before he said coldly, "I'm sorry. You'll get your money."

"You God damn right I will." His voice had risen. "I was trying to catch that crazy outlaw for you. That's the son of a bitch ought to be shot." He gestured so abruptly that the horse's head jerked.

"That's a fact," said a man behind him.

"I told him," Bantam said. Duncan's gaze whipped onto his face. Bantam was not looking at him, he was studying his cigarette. But as he spoke he let his own gaze mount until, for just the space of a syllable, his eyes looked straight into Duncan's. They were full of naked hate. "That horse a killer. He done tried to get me already."

Duncan felt the tautness about his lips, in the muscles of his forearms. Turning his eyes away was an effort, like breaking out of a trance. Grover's face changed. It was as though he had suddenly spied danger in what had looked innocent before. He faltered, but he did not back down.

"I'll pay you for the mare." Duncan's voice was clear, though little above a whisper. "But not because you can make me."

"The hell I can't," Grover managed.

"Why don't you try." Unconsciously Duncan had lifted the hand that held the crop.

This time Grover's face blanched. He stepped back. There was a moment filled only with the tireless pumping rhythm of the calliope. It was then that Bantam laughed softly, a sound humorless and mocking and forced, voiceless spasms of breath welling up out of his throat. It stung the attention of even Grover. Bantam had time to finish the laugh, to let the taut smile relax. Then the smile was cut dead. His head rocked back with the clean report of the leather. A stripe as white as a chalk line appeared across his cheek and upper lip. His hand went to it, as though in shame to hide what the crop had done. Except there was no shame in his eyes. They were swimming

suddenly in a kind of fierce reddish mist. The hand dropped a few inches from his face, contracted into the shape of a rigid claw. And still the hand with the crop hung balanced, barely trembling with the strain, on the verge of another descent.

"What's going on here?"

Duncan did not look immediately; only after a moment, as one with Bantam, like men in an armed truce. He saw the red-faced deputy.

"The bastard's getting free with his whip," Grover said. "Says he don't have to pay for my mare, he's a big shot."

The deputy looked at Duncan. The gaze he met defied him, and his eyes hardened. "He'll pay all right." He did not take his eyes from Duncan. "Or by God I'll haul him in by the seat of his breeches."

Duncan knew instantly the sort he was. But he could not resist forming a silent word with his lips.

"What'd you say?" The hamlike face contorted a little dramatically about the lips. Duncan thought how it would look with a white stripe across the cheek and mouth.

"Nothing," Duncan said.

"Don't give me any of your shit. I'll haul you in right now." He was enjoying the part. It delighted him to find this token resistance in Duncan.

"What'll you use for a charge?" Duncan said.

The deputy glared at him. "Don't you worry none about a charge. I'll worry about that."

Duncan controlled his anger. The horse was stirring. Ahead, the group of men stood blocking the path.

"He's a bad man with that whip," Grover said.

The deputy looked at Grover with the air of an indulgent big brother.

"He hit you with that thing, Sam?"

"Hell no," Grover said. "He hit this nigger here."

Bantam threw him a glance of half-veiled hatred. The deputy looked at Bantam. Bantam's eyes, still red, wandered away from the deputy. The mark the crop left was swelling, like a pinkish worm across his face. The deputy looked back at Duncan. He met the same cold stare.

"Bad man with a whip, ain't you?"

He stepped closer. Duncan's hand tightened on the crop. The horse, already restive, struck the ground with his

hoof. The deputy stepped back. He was about to add something in a tone even nastier.

"I wants to prefer charges," Bantam said.

Duncan turned in the saddle. They were all looking at Bantam. One of the men in the group guffawed. The deputy was gazing at him with astonishment. Bantam's face was sullen; his eyes settled on the deputy and wavered and settled again.

"I got a right to," he said, "same as a white man have. It's in the law . . . and the law's color-blind. I hadn't never done nothing to him." His hand went to his face, as though to point out his evidence. His glance settled finally on Duncan.

The deputy's mouth came open. "Who in the—"

"Sure, that's right." Grover was grinning. "Let him prefer charges."

The deputy looked at him, stupidly. "You ain't serious?"

"Sure. He's in the right. You're the law, ain't you? Let him prefer charges."

The deputy stood a moment, slack-mouthed. Then his lips closed with decision. "Yeah, I reckon I will." He looked up at Duncan. His expression became shrewd. "I reckon I will."

Duncan laughed in his face.

The effect was as if Duncan had slapped him. His face went the color of brick. "Get down off that horse."

Ahead the men were blocking the way. Grover had moved up beside the deputy. Duncan felt his lips taut.

"Get down from there," the deputy barked.

"You go to hell." He spurred the horse. But in the instant he felt hands on his ankle, saw Grover go for the bridle. He felt his fist strike the deputy's face, and the horse rear and lunge from under him. In mid-air his foot kicked loose. He struck the ground half blind with rage and dust. He was on his feet, swinging. He saw the deputy's face recoil off his fist. Then there were others, there were voices, and the red face was back again and he was swinging at it. Suddenly his arms were pinioned. He was looking into the livid face, the drooling blood, so close that Duncan could smell his breath. "You son of a bitch," the deputy wheezed. Duncan thought for a moment the deputy would hit him.

Then the realization struck him. "Where's my horse?" "Never mind about that bastard," the deputy growled. "Gone home," a man said. "Went out that gate like a bullet."

"I got to get him." The arms that held him tightened. "You ain't got to do nothing but what I tell you to." The blood had run onto his lip. He licked it off with his pink tongue.

Duncan lunged, but the arms held. "I got to get him, you damn fool, he's running loose."

The deputy's lip curled.

"You better let him, Winston."

The deputy whirled. "The hell I—"

It was the sheriff. He had a face as immobile as if it had just come out of many hours exposed to bitterest weather. The skin—there was no flesh—cleaved to his skull, exposing mercilessly every separate feature of bone, muscle, ligament. When he spoke his lips moved faintly, so that one was surprised at the distinctness of his words. "You better let him go."

"But he's under arrest. Assaulting—"

"Go with him then. Can't let that thing run loose. Dangerous." He walked away. He had not glanced at Duncan, had not showed even normal interest in what might have happened.

They went in the sheriff's car. The deputy had recruited somebody, a little runty friend of his, to ride with him in the front seat. He ignored Duncan and his furious impatience. His slow driving seemed, was, deliberate. With an effort at casualness he talked to his little friend, who now and then cast militant glances back at Duncan. Once the deputy half turned his head and growled into a rearview mirror: "Set back, by God; else I'll take you straight on in." And he drove slower than ever, in demonstration of his independence. Duncan gritted his teeth and looked at the red neck and thought how if anything happened to Chief—

The horse had followed the same route home. He had passed through town. Like a big four-legged bird, they said, scattering cars and people and wagons. All the way to the turnoff that was Duncan's front gate they did not

even sight his dust. Seeing the gate, Duncan breathed his relief. Then his breath caught suddenly.

"Keep on . . . don't turn."

Up ahead off the road a team of mules was straining a wagon out of the gulley. A Negro was edging up the bank with the lines. He checked the mules.

"Boss, it look mighty like a horse," the Negro answered. "It sure were moving. His dust ain't got here yet."

"For God's sake, hurry," Duncan hissed.

The horse had already reached Jordan's. He galloped along the barn lot fence, wheeled, galloped back. Jordan's stud was not in sight. But there was a mare and colt in the lot. The horse stopped galloping. He stood at the fence and pawed, striking up the dust, throwing his head upwards and sideways in a seeming fit of violence. The fence was high; but neither high enough nor strong enough if Chief took it in his head.

Duncan was running before the car stopped. He could hear Jordan's stud, screaming, crashing in his stall. And then Chief's furious shrill response. It might happen at any instant now. But Duncan had reached him. He simply lunged at the horse's muzzle. It struck his chest and he fell. But he had the bridle. The horse, shying violently back, pulled him to his feet. He staggered, leaned against the bridle. Until the horse ceased fighting, and Duncan grabbed the bit and put a hand above the scarlet-winking nostrils.

"You had luck," Matt Jordan drawled. "Dick wasn't here." He chewed tobacco with a tedious exaggerated gaping of his mouth. He looked like a gross and weather-beaten version of his son.

Duncan turned the horse. The effort it took to get in the saddle surprised him.

"If I was you, I'd see he don't get over here no more," Jordan said without heat, chewing.

Duncan spurred the horse and moved off. He heard the deputy say, "I'll be right behind you"; and then his voice as he turned to Jordan, the tone that bespoke his capacity as servant of the people. Ahead the sun glared off the yellow dust. After a little he closed his eyes against that bright throbbing pain in his temple.

Later, except for the pain, everything seemed blurred. He had not minded the deputy's insolence. He had been nothing more than impatient to be left alone. So that he was almost grateful when the barred door was closed on him and he was by himself in the empty cell. He sat on the cot and cupped his face in his hands and shut his eyes against the pain. It was a long time, hours maybe, before he had the desire to open them again. Still he hesitated. It was like making an important and irrevocable decision . . . as though the light might do some permanent injury to his vision. He heard someone snoring, the deep ragged snore of a drunk. He opened his eyes.

The cell was dark. But a darkness enfeebled by the smear of electric light that fell in the corridor and the glow of starlight at the two barred windows. His left eyelid, the whole left side of his face, felt heavy and drawn. He raised the lid with his finger, thinking how it made no difference, that eye was blind anyway. The scab of blood was still on his temple and cheek. Gently he stroked the side of his face. The pain had dulled to a numb throbbing.

He went to one of the windows and looked out at the darkened building next door, at the empty street defined through intervals of shadow by still yellow pools that lay under the street lights. He did not feel in the least humiliated or even angry . . . not now, anyway. He thought only about how strange, almost fantastic, it was that he should be in this old jail.

He went to the back window. There was a kennel behind the jail where the sheriff kept his pair of bloodhounds. They were the only things he loved, people said; he had no family, no kin. He had trained them himself. He pampered them and took them out for runs several days a week. With anyone but him they were vicious; he kept them that way, and no one else ever went into their kennel. Duncan could see one of them, as big as a wolf, curled up in a black heap against the fence. He gazed at the dog until he realized suddenly that he was tired, that his head ached again. He went back to the cot.

He opened his eyes in daylight. At first he thought he had dreamed the incident that had happened sometime late in the night; it had been so quick, so strangely incongruous, coming between two heavy dreamless sleeps. He

had waked up in the dark conscious that someone was at the window. He saw two hands come up and grip the bars, and then a head rise, frame itself in the square of pale light.

"Hey, Duncan."

Duncan stepped to the window. "Who is it?"

The head sank down, was looking up at him from below.

"Me. You making out all right in there?"

"Aaron?"

The bloodhounds in the kennel were growling.

"Yeah. I'll get you out of there, if you want me to."

Duncan felt a smile come to his lips. "I'll get out tomorrow."

"Wouldn't be no trouble. They ain't nothing in there but one hog asleep on a bench."

"I'll get out the easy way tomorrow. I'm obliged to you, anyway."

"All right," Aaron said. "You watch them, though. Can't trust them bastards."

The growling from the kennel had turned to snarls. Suddenly Aaron was gone. The snarling became furious. He heard the fence creak with the weight of the dogs' bodies. He got to the window in time to see, hear, the stone, like a man's head, strike; and the dog roll with a howling yelp on the ground and struggle up again, snarling but shy of the fence. He heard Aaron laugh, saw him, dimly, stalking off into the shadows.

There were quick footsteps in the office and the screen door slammed shut. The deputy came on the run. He stopped at the fence and stared into the kennel and then around him into the dark. The sound of his voice muttering quiet blasphemies was mingled with the snarling of the dogs. Duncan went back to his cot and lay down. He buried his face in his arms and laughed uncontrollably. But the laughing hurt his head. Soon the pain stopped him. Then sleep came almost suddenly.

Garner was there, already in the office when Duncan had opened his eyes. He was the reason the deputy came and unlocked the door and told Duncan he could go . . . for now. Garner perceived Duncan's resentment. He had tact enough to dispatch the thing with a minimum of com-

ment. But he did gaze studiously for a moment at Duncan's face, and then, looking away, advise that he see a doctor.

Outside, Duncan felt like laughing again. He thought of the sheriff's tight cadaverous face pale with rage at what he must have just now learned.

He went home and straight to the barn. He was relieved that he did not meet any of the Negroes. Then he went to the house and bathed his face and treated the cut on his temple. It was uglier than he had thought, like a core at the center of a large purplish swelling. After forcing himself to eat something, he lay down on the bed and shut out the light with his arm. He went to sleep with a feeling as if a cool hand were resting lightly on the injured side of his face.

CHAPTER TWO

"I'm not trying to offend you," Garner said. "You know I'm right."

But he was offending. Insofar as Duncan was concerned Garner could not open his mouth without offense. Even when he tried to be pleasant, as he had tried at the start of this conversation. That had been more like a gap, a spell of inertia, while his forces mustered themselves and Duncan waited for what was bound to come. Margaret Mary too had seen it coming. She had fallen silent then and averted her face and gazed down where the sunlight fell on the still surface of the creek. Ever since, her stillness had lain upon her like a glove. Because she could not help what was coming. Because, in a way, Garner himself could not help where his ideas led him. They were like passions, tempting him where he had not planned to go. So that he had come upon the matter as though inadvertently. Once there, even the flush of hatred he raised up in Duncan had not been enough to turn him back. To his own surprise Duncan had contained his hatred. After the first he found himself able to answer with something that simulated calm. Now he said, almost patiently:

"But you're always certain you're right. Why is it *you* know what's right for everybody."

Garner, equally patient, paused a second. "Look at it this way, then. What have you got in the way of friends or companionship? You don't belong to the church or anything else. You don't even belong to the world. You're like a hermit."

"All right, I'm a hermit then. Why not? I'm sure there've been some good ones."

"I doubt it," Garner said. "Even religious ones. They're all egoists thinking about their own little souls and no one else's. No man can live by himself. If he does, he becomes an animal. Men are made for the world. They can only find happiness and the richness of life with their fellows."

"But I've already been in the 'world.' Remember? Seven long years. If I'd found all this happiness and 'richness of life' do you think I'd have come back?"

"That's because you wouldn't—"

"I think you people have done a job of surgery on the world that it won't soon get over."

Garner ignored the interruption. His hands lay perfectly still on the arms of the porch chair. "Because you wouldn't accept it. You're afraid of change. You came back here to get away from it. And the world is changing. There is such a thing as progress, and we're making it. We're already beginning to see the difference, in every walk of life, even in little Brady. You can't get away from it . . . here or anywhere. To resist it like you're doing—"

"You don't ever get sick of cant, do you?" Duncan said.

A brief anger flashed in Garner's watery eyes. His lips parted, then closed decisively, as though he thought better of what he had meant to say. After a little he said, "You're going to stay on here, then . . . for good?"

"Yes . . . Me and my horse," Duncan added with irony.

"But what do you think your life will be like down here? You and a horse."

Duncan looked at him. His patience was gone suddenly. But he controlled his voice. "Look. This is none of your business. I've never asked you for advice or anything else. I didn't even ask you to get me out of jail, you just did it." He got up and stepped to the edge of the porch. Then, with his back to Garner, "I guess that's an example of my anti-social nature, isn't it . . . my getting in jail? Even if it is,

it's none of your business. I like my life the way it is; I want to be left alone. If you've got to be an adviser, then don't come——"

"Oh, stop it," Margaret Mary said, "it's all so useless." She averted her face more than ever so as not to meet their eyes. "Maybe we had better not come any more . . . together."

Garner was looking at her with a little surprise in his face. No one spoke for a long time. Then it was Margaret Mary, softly to Duncan. During the rest of the visit Garner said nothing. He seemed deaf to the stumbling conversation that Duncan and Margaret Mary carried on. He gazed between them out into the yard.

"Get down out of there," Aaron said.

The dog started at his voice and jumped down out of the truck. He walked slowly over to the steps and sank onto his belly.

"Can't have that son of a bitch in there drooling all over us," Aaron said.

The dog lay watching them in the dim light of the half-moon.

"All set. We better get to rolling."

The load looked innocent enough . . . for daytime, anyway; like a small load of straw bales. Under the straw the kegs were set in tight triple rows. Aaron gave one more push to a corner bale. Then he started for the cab. He stopped.

"Wait a minute. You want another drink?"

"All right," Duncan said.

Aaron went in the house and came back with a fruit jar. He gave it to Duncan first.

"I always like a little drink before I leave," he said. "Seems like it makes everything keener."

Duncan handed him the jar. His eyes were smarting from the raw whisky. Aaron swallowed three times heavily, with three spasmodic jerks of his Adam's apple. He heaved a long noisy breath.

"That's a good a lot as I ever run." He handed the jar back to Duncan. "Here, take some more."

Duncan swallowed briefly. Aaron took the jar and set it on the floor of the cab and slipped onto the seat. The

starter whined. He cursed and mashed it again. "Junk pile," he muttered. "And the bastard rents it like it was new. You get your'n fixed, we'll take it next time."

The engine coughed and broke into a roar. They moved slowly down the ridge along the winding wagon road. The yellow beam of the headlights shifted over a matted sea of briars and buckbushes that grew up tight to the road clearing. They angled into a hollow and forded the stream and climbed a bank uneasily steep onto the highway. Then Aaron drove fast. He did not slow down when they reached Brady. He laughed when Duncan cautioned him.

"Police is like hogs. Takes them a long time to get woke up." He laughed again.

There was no one on the streets. They sped across the square. Then they were out on the paved highway, and Aaron drove faster still. He was singing a plaintive song about wild geese, but most of the words were lost in the noise the engine made. He was not drunk; not with the whisky, anyway. But there was about him all the half-contained exuberance of a man just escaped from long confinement. It was something new in him, something compelling. Duncan caught the mood. He no longer much regretted that he had given in to Aaron. He began to enjoy the speed, the sense of risk that came with every curve of the road.

It was well after midnight when they reached Nashville. They passed only a few cars on the streets, and now and then a lonesome-looking figure straggling down a sidewalk, or leaning against a building. Aaron had slowed down some, but not enough for prudence. Some of the stragglers turned and looked after them. Again Duncan cautioned him. This time Aaron listened. But when he turned off the lighted street into the darker desertion of the marketing section he sped up again. They passed the stockyards and a packing house where Duncan had traded. The truck lurched over the rough pavement. Suddenly they heard a shout and the blast of a whistle. Duncan just glimpsed the policeman motioning to them from the sidewalk. Aaron mashed the throttle and honked his horn in derision. They could still hear the policeman's whistle.

"Listen to him tooting his god-damn whistle," Aaron

said. He was grinning. "Might as well, he ain't no account for nothing else."

A moment later he said, "I'd like to throw one of them whisky kegs at him. Bastard'd be down there lapping it off the pavement."

"You better take it easy," Duncan said.

They turned up a dark alley, and then into a parking space behind a frame building.

"What kind of a place is it?"

"Honky-tonk. You got to look out around here. One of them Eytalians runs it."

They got out of the truck. A man had opened the back door at the top of the steps, was looking down at them.

"I brung your whisky," Aaron said.

"Don't talk so god-damn loud," the man said.

"I brung your whisky," Aaron said even louder.

"All right, put it in, then . . . and keep your mouth shut." He closed the door.

"That fellow better mind his tongue," Aaron said. He climbed onto the truck bed. One of the corner bales had been lost, exposing the tops of a couple of kegs. Aaron threw the rest of the bales aside. One by one he handed the kegs down to Duncan.

"I ain't seen that fellow before," Aaron said. "He better look to his manners."

They carried the kegs into the basement. It was black night inside and they had to feel their way across the littered floor. Duncan stumbled and cursed.

"Let's have some light down here," Aaron said.

They heard the muted and blasphemous growl of a voice upstairs, and deliberate feet crossing the floor. A dim bulb went on. The floor was scattered with broken boxes and kegs and lumps of coal.

"That's better," Aaron said in a loud voice. And then, "Stinks down here, don't it?"

"It does that all right," Duncan said.

They set the kegs about in odd clearings on the basement floor. Then they went out and up the back steps.

Aaron pushed the door open onto a small back-room bar. The dance hall beyond the opposite door was unlighted. Three men looked up from a table where they were playing cards under a single bulb. A squat man

looked at them irritably over the bottles and glasses that lined the counter. He held the stub of a pencil choked in his fat hand. In the dim mirror behind the counter the round head seemed to sit squarely on the hump of his back.

"Where's Greasy?" Aaron said.

"Out of town," the man said. He drew a hairy wrist, bare to the rolled-back cuff, across the tip of his nose.

"Well, it don't make me no difference long as I get my money."

"You got fourteen," the man said.

"That's right. You got mighty sharp eyes."

The man turned to the cash register.

"I reckon I'll have a beer first. You can take it out of my money."

The man turned with a scowl to the cooler and opened a beer and set it sharply on the counter.

"My friend here'll have one too," Aaron drawled.

The man growled something and set one up for Duncan. He turned to the cash register again and rang it open with a curt punch of his finger.

Duncan glanced a little uneasily toward the men at the table. They were not playing cards, they were watching, smoking. Wreaths of smoke rose up to the bare light bulb. One of the men was idly shuffling the cards with a sound like ripping cloth. He had a hat on. Under the shadow of the brim Duncan could feel his eyes. But from the look of Aaron the men might not have been there at all. He leaned resting against the counter, arched upon one elbow, drinking his beer. He had about him the air of a big lazy cat; not unobservant, just lazy.

The man laid the money down in a little stack in front of Aaron. He picked up the pencil and the little book and moved down the counter. He threw Aaron a brief white glance, then set to work again with a show of concentration. Duncan looked at the money. Aaron had not yet shown any interest whatever. He was looking around the room now.

"Duncan, we ought to come down here some night. I bet they got some women." He looked at the man. "Ain't you?"

The man glanced up at him, then went quickly back to his book, "Bring your own. This ain't no whore house."

Aaron laughed. He took another swallow of beer. The men were looking at him again. The one with the hat was dealing the cards, slowly, thoughtfully.

"We better be getting on back," Duncan said.

"Don't you want some more beer?"

"Not tonight."

Aaron drained the bottle and set it down on the counter. "Well." He looked at the money. He picked it up and began to count it slowly, bill by bill, out loud. The man at the counter glanced at him again.

"I get seventy-seven," Aaron said. He looked at the man. "Here, Duncan, you count it."

"Seventy-seven's right," Duncan murmured when he got through. He noticed the men. They were all attentive, without motion.

"I got eighty-four coming," Aaron said.

"Greasy said that's all to give you. Said that's all anybody's getting, he overpaid you last time." He studied his book.

"I reckon you better give me the rest," Aaron said.

"Greasy said if you didn't like the price take it somewhere else."

"You better give me that money," Aaron said.

There was a pause. The man looked toward the table. Aaron started down the counter. A chair scraped and one of the men, the one least in view, stood up. It was not his standing up, it was his size that struck Duncan. It was as if until then he had kept a part of his body hidden under the table. He stood with his hand on the chair, a pose which seemed to say that the effort of standing up would be enough. Aaron looked at him.

"I didn't know you kept no ape here," he said. "You better keep him tied up."

The big man's face did not change, but he moved. He came around the table and halted a step away from Aaron. He was by a little the shorter. But compared to Aaron's leanness the man's body looked as thick as the trunk of a tree. His voice, through scarred lips, through a gap where teeth should have been, had the toneless quality of the deaf.

"This your last chance to get out of here, Buddy."

Aaron did not stiffen. He seemed in fact to have fallen

lazy again, as though bored by the interruption. He did not answer. When it came, the stiffening of his body was all one gesture with his crouch, the coil and vicious strike of his arm. The blow seemed to jerk his whole body after it, as though even the giver had not had time to make ready. Duncan did not see where it struck the man. But he heard it, saw the head recoil. The man fell straight backward. There was a moment of jarring silence. Then the man was on his elbow. He was looking around him confusedly, muttering.

Duncan looked toward the men at the table. Their hands had frozen on the cards. The man with the hat held his bent nearly double in his fingers.

Then a movement brought Duncan's eyes back. The man had gotten to his knees, quickly, almost stealthily. He was in a crouch, glaring obliquely up at Aaron. Duncan's first glance told him that Aaron did not see. He had slumped back against the counter; his face was half averted. One hand, resting on top of the counter, fingered an overturned bottle. Duncan opened his mouth to warn him. Then he saw through it. He saw Aaron's hand tighten on the bottle. He saw the man's arm dart out toward Aaron's leg and, in the same instant, what seemed an explosion into which the man's head had intruded. Glass showered around him. This time the man lay face down, shuddering. Already his blood was darkening the floor. Aaron stood over him with the jagged neck of the bottle in his hand. For a second Duncan held his breath.

"Anything I hate's a man to come sneaking on me," Aaron drawled. "Seems like somebody sneaking up makes me madder'n anything."

"I reckon I better get my money, hadn't I, Duncan? Seeing as how won't nobody give it to me." He went around the counter. He still had the bottle neck in his hand. The dumpy man flinched. "Get out of here," Aaron said. The man hurried past him, waddling, and crossed to the table where the others sat.

"Better watch them boys for me," he said to Duncan. "One of them liable to try sneaking up on me." He banged the cash register.

But the men were motionless, wooden in the glaring immobility of the light. Only the one on the floor was moving.

He seemed to be trying groggily to get onto his elbows. There was blood on his hands. He was moaning. At the cash register Aaron said in a tone of public meditation:

"One thing I can't take: that's somebody to sneak up on me. Pick up a stick or something, I don't mind that so bad. It's when they get to sneaking. That's when I can't take it."

The man had struggled to his elbows. His forehead was a smear of blood flowing from invisible gashes under his hair. Duncan looked at the men around the table.

"Better do something for this guy."

"Little old seven dollars," Aaron said. "And you got a drawer plumb full. You better be glad I'm a honest man." He left the drawer open and came around the counter with his fist full of bills. He looked down at the man.

"Yeah," he said, "you better do something for this boy here . . . you better teach him not to sneak up on folks. . . . Hadn't they?" he said to the man on the floor.

The man mumbled something incoherent; it did not sound like words, even. But from Aaron's reaction it might as well have been some venomous insult. His foot was suddenly on the man's neck. "Lie down," he snarled. He pressed down hard. The man's head thumped against the floor. "Take a little nap. It'll—"

"Cut it out, Aaron." Duncan had moved a step closer.

Aaron looked at him, and his eyes flashed. For a moment they held the light, like a cat's eyes. But he removed his foot, though deliberately. Then they stood facing each other silently across the man's body. Aaron's eyes dimmed, like failing electric bulbs. He turned away.

After that, they left quickly. Aaron had ceased to swagger; he had nothing else to say to the men. Only Duncan spoke, again advising them to help the man on the floor. But none of them had moved from around the table when he closed the door behind him.

For a while they rode in silence. Aaron drove rapidly still, but now it was habit; the mood was gone. He stared ahead at the road with rigid constancy. Duncan felt only depression and a sense of the distance that lay between him and home. Several times he had the feeling that Aaron had started to speak. But neither one of them so far had been able to break the silence.

They were out on the highway, beyond the last lights of the suburbs. The roar of the motor, the coursing of air through the shattered windows, were the only sounds that reached him. Now he hoped it would last. He closed his eyes. He thought about Chief in his stall.

"I don't see how come it makes you no difference about that ape," Aaron said suddenly.

Called back so abruptly from his thoughts, Duncan could not think of a reply.

"It ain't like he didn't ask for what I give him. You seen him try to sneak up on me."

"He asked for it, all right . . . some of it."

"I sure wasn't about to let him get them arms on me. Son of a bitch would of broke my neck if he could."

"I guess so," Duncan murmured. Then, after a pause, "It was just that stomping I couldn't see."

"He asked for that too. And more besides. Like I say, when a man sneaks up on me he better get ready for what's coming. That's one thing I can't take. That, and somebody trying to cheat me. And them getting three times what I ask them for that whisky anyhow. They ain't nothing but a bunch of scum. I ought not to of stopped with that one. They ain't a one of them there but ought to have his head busted. I'd of done it too, if 'er one just looked at me cross-eyed."

What he said did not call for an answer. Duncan did not try to give one.

"That fellow didn't even get all he had coming. He won't know the difference next week. You can't kill that kind, even if they was worth it. Got heads like a goat." He went on for some time on the impetus of his resurrected anger. Then he began to falter in Duncan's silence. "It ain't like it made no difference," he said. Then he hushed. He seemed about to make one more attempt at speech before Duncan's silence engulfed him, and his eyes froze again down the empty channel of the highway.

Yet Duncan had not wanted to squelch him. He was moved, even, by this dumbness which his own silence had wrought. But no reply came to him, and he could not muster the will to invent. It was not the act itself, its curt brutality, which mainly depressed him; it was what the act, and Aaron's whole behavior, revealed. In a way he felt he

had been betrayed by Aaron. Or rather, not by Aaron, who had never dissimulated; but by his own deliberate blindness in creating an image which did not match, or only in part matched, facts which already had been apparent. Deliberately. He remembered all the times when he had seen suggested, prefigured, what had been acted out tonight. And with all this he had walked open-eyed into the disillusionment he felt now.

The whole way back he did not speak again; not until they were approaching Duncan's front gate. Then it was coming dawn. Duncan gazed at the iron-gray smudge of light in the east.

"Going to rain."

"Yeah," Aaron said abstractedly without turning his head. "You won't do no riding today."

They stopped. Duncan was getting out. Now Aaron was looking at him. "You better take a piece of this money," he said without much interest in his voice. His mood, Duncan saw, had altered drastically, had hardened in the long silence. His yellow eyes were alight in the semidarkness of the cab. Once again, for a moment, they held Duncan fixed in that familiar and cold and unrevealing scrutiny.

"No thanks," Duncan said. "I've got no right to it. I just went for the ride."

Then he was walking in the first gray light of dawn, listening to the truck fade out in the distance.

He rode by Aaron's less often now, and his stops were briefer. Within a couple of days after the incident Duncan had not seen why his altered view of Aaron should make any substantial difference in the kind of friendship they had. But it was not the same at all. In those hours of chill and silent reappraisal they had passed that night in the truck, something more subtle had been born, or killed, between them. It resulted in an unpleasant and self-conscious restraint on the part of them both. Where before they had talked freely, unhesitatingly, with pauses like easy yawns in their conversation, they now broke down in arid silences. More than ever he was conscious of Aaron's eyes, the cat-like intentness with which they studied him. The strain of their meetings disturbed Duncan, tired him. And it persisted, even after several visits, mocking the friendship he

found himself suddenly missing. He thought that perhaps with time the difficulty would vanish. Meanwhile there was nothing he could do.

With the Negroes there seemed to be nothing left at all. Bantam had gone; at least away from the farm, though Duncan had heard he was still in Brady. But his withdrawal made no difference. Or only the difference that it widened the gap already made by his presence. Logan and Wesley fell sullen when Duncan was with them. He himself had nearly ceased to try; would have ceased entirely except that now and then he caught what he interpreted as a gleam of regret in Logan's eyes. But even these moments left him with only a feeling of impotence.

Chief was growing still more beautiful. The summer's hard work had swelled and shaped his muscles. His mane and tail had grown; they resembled the well-combed hair of a blonde woman. He had reached the peak of his beauty, the moment of balance between grace and power. His pride stood in his eyes, in the way he lifted his ears and tail when Duncan rode him. Only one thing was lacking—that there were so few appreciative eyes to see and admire him. In this sense at least Duncan longed to share his beauty with others. He missed the plans he had laid in the early summer, to ride the horse through Brady, to haul him around to shows that took place in the late summer and early fall. But now he would not risk it again. He stuck to the wagon trails, and roads where traffic was light.

Chief knew Duncan's step in the corridor of the barn. He would ignore any other. Except for those occasions—and they had grown rarer—when he was indifferent even to Duncan, his head would be out over the half-door watching his master approach. Sometimes he would nicker softly. And there were times when he would nudge Duncan with his nose, or harmlessly with his lips snatch at an ear or a cheek. Often, holding the horse's head against his face, Duncan would whisper to him, and Chief would stand as though listening with restless ears, batting an eye when Duncan's breath touched too near it. Chief seemed to love the rides. If Duncan missed a day, the horse spent it pawing or wheeling about in his stall. When Duncan came to feed him on those days—and it was always Duncan; the Negroes had taken an almost sudden dislike, or

fear, of the horse—Chief's nicker swelled as loud as a trumpet in the barn. It was not in impatience for the grain and hay he would get; it was for the miles of road that he wanted to travel over again.

Duncan's night rides followed the moon. After the full moon the rides started late, and he slept through the early part of the night. A number of times it was the horse that waked him. Through the open window of his bedroom he heard the clear lonesome call, and echoes like ripples rebounding out of the hollows and off the still rock bluffs. Like a human voice almost; or a voice sad in its hopeless longing to be human. He was not always sure the horse had really called him. Sometimes he thought he must have dreamed it, for he waked up attentive to a stillness in which he heard not even the secret chirrup of the crickets. The waning moon, still low over the horizon, cast the tall black shadows of trees upon the ground, and a light as uncertain as dreams. He had not undressed. He got up from his bed and went out and saddled the horse.

At these times of night all places seemed almost equally deserted. All except the country across the river where he went occasionally, where even during these empty hours the contrast with the land around was striking. The loneliness of the place seemed still more profound; and unchangingly so, in all times and weathers. It was all this bare white rock, Duncan thought; and the gutted irregularity of the earth, and all these dead and half-dead trees. It may have been imagination, but, as in the past, Duncan fancied the place had about it a perpetual physical chill apparent on the very hottest nights of summer. And now that the nights were cooler with the fall, he shivered a bit as he rode down off the ridge. Chief's body tensed. Always he grew watchful and skittish. Two or three times he shied with a violence that almost unseated Duncan, and tried to run away. It was bobcats, maybe; they were here. Duncan had heard them, that rasping witchlike scream, as though they were crying out of a throat full of blood.

It grew too cold to ride at night. Then he was waking up and looking out on mornings of white frost. But just as he thought that winter was coming on in earnest, a splendid Indian summer broke over the land. The change of the season was halted. The leaves in all the full and burgeoned

colors of their death, their yellow and crimson and bronze, were arrested on the branches. The horizon was hazy; all day long the air smelled delicately of smoke. But overhead the sky had that rich, almost startling blue that one sees in a gander's eyes. As always the time saddened and exalted him, teased him with half-conscious or forgotten memories. His thoughts, even his vision, of particular things seemed a little indefinite sometimes. More so when he was riding, he thought, and seeing unfamiliar country. He rode far, farther than ever before. They were tireless, both of them. At moments he felt that his body had no weight at all on Chief's back, that they moved as a single body scarcely aware of a point of separation. In this mood he gave up speaking his accustomed terms of command or affection. The steep-mounting road did not give them pause, did not even take their breath. At the tops of the high ridges their hearts seemed as still as ever, like the drowsing heart of the country beneath, and the glassy face of the river in the distance. Sunset always surprised him, sometimes caught him miles from home. Each time he looked up with half a start to see the sun suspended in its last reddening flare of light. At home when he dismounted the ground was a shock to his legs. At first they seemed unsubstantial; until his muscles came alive again.

He still found time to visit Aunt Virgy. He had gone more often than ever during the last couple of months, a great part of the time on foot. With her there was no change . . . inwardly, at least. Outwardly, she was going blind with a rapidity that struck him anew each time he went to see her. Her blindness was not yet perfect, but the world that her eyes saw was all within inches of her face. Sometimes she would pull Duncan down close, so close he could feel on his lips the nearly imperceptible drafts of her breathing. Then, with the help of her cool fingers, like velvet over his skin, she would spell out each of his features. Afterward, he was glad he had been patient. Sitting not quite upright in the chair, a little out of balance, there was about her an almost feline serenity. He had noticed it much of late. It had seemed to grow almost in pace with her encroaching blindness, as though the last causes of worry and anger and fear were now sinking back into the darkness

beyond her narrowing range of vision. It was as if this blindness was a help to her. Her actions, such as they were, after so many repetitions did not require any eyes; not even to wind the watch at estimated intervals, or to prepare the impossibly frugal meals on which she existed. Now, having seen all there was worth seeing, she could rest with this changeless image of things which she kept warm in her heart.

Some days when he walked up he stayed for a long time. He rarely had very much to say. She did most of the talking . . . when they talked, for there were many interludes of forgetful silence. Often she lapsed into a monologue as likely as not to have as its subject some event of seventy-five years ago. Or the distant past and the present would become confused in her mind; an incident of now would suddenly appear in an ancient context. Duncan quit being surprised to hear himself mentioned as though he had been present, even an actor in one of those distant events. In fact at such times his interest quickened; he went along with the story as one may go along with a play in which he identifies himself. Aunt Virgy, quite unawares, strengthened the illusion by an aside now and then, or a question like, "You knows how the old master were?" speaking of his great-grandfather whom he had never seen. Duncan would answer with a murmur of assent.

But sometimes he grew drowsy while she talked. On several occasions he fell sound asleep against the wall where he was sitting, and dreamed. His dreams were unpleasant, more like nightmares. He could never remember the details. When he opened his eyes they blurred into a single incoherent impression. Each time the impression was nearly the same: the dreams began in a contentment that gradually was dispelled by the threat of an unnamed evil, an evil with which he had neither the knowledge nor the strength to cope.

Once he woke up thinking of the crow. He remembered he had not seen it that day when he came, or the time before either.

"You done had a good sleep," Aunt Virgy said. Even blind she seemed to know always the instant he opened his eyes.

After a pause he said, "What became of that old crow?"

"Somewhere around, I reckon. I ain't notice him much here late."

It surprised him to hear her speak of it with indifference, without a trace of rancor. Perhaps her indifference had effected what her bursts of fury had failed to do. Somehow he hoped it was gone for good. But as he came out of the cabin his eyes went straight to the crow. It was as if he had already known it was there, perched very still and watchful on the skeleton tree at the top of the ridge.

He waked up every morning just before sunrise. He always went straight to the kitchen and lit a fire he had laid in the cookstove the night before. He left the lid off and, shivering, dressed himself by the rising flames. One morning was warmer than those before had been; he did not shiver while he dressed. Afterward he remembered this detail as linked to what it had only preceded. He remembered it as the beginning, as though it had been the trivial but effective cause of the thing. He had thought the warm morning meant rain and the final coming of winter. He was glancing out at the sky. It was then he heard what sounded at first like distant thunder. He focused on it. Instantly he knew what it was. He bolted out of the door in time to see the horse fly past him down the slope and hit the ford in a silver spray of water. Duncan ran toward the ford. In full stride the horse topped the opposite bank. He met suddenly a splash of sunlight out of the east, and his shoes were glancing off the earth, and his rump and neck were trailing streamers of gold.

Duncan wheeled and ran for the barn. He stumbled on his untied shoestrings and fell and in that instantaneous pause he heard the horse's feet receding down the valley. He reached the barn and the truck. He screamed curses at the sullen engine. When it started he pushed the pedal to the floor. He crashed a gate that stood half open and struck the creek at a speed that momentarily left the windshield blind with water. Then he was on the level road. He did not try to miss the ruts.

But he was not quick enough. As he approached Jordan's gate he saw that the stallions would come together. Jordan's horse was in the paddock. He seemed, in the swiftness with which his front feet bounded off the earth, in the

cloud of dust he had raised about him, to be standing, even walking, upright, like some mythical or prehistoric giant. Already Duncan could hear his fury above the noise of the engine. Chief had turned out of the lane that led to the stable, was heading for him like a charger across the corner of the meadow. Someone was running, as though with a wild intention to head him off. Before Duncan could stop the truck, Chief had reached the horse. He slowed abruptly before he hit. But he did not seem to lose force; he seemed only to gain in stature as his body rose out of the mounting dust into that shrill chaos of hoofs and flashing teeth that burst suddenly above the topmost rail of the fence. Then the fence was shattered.

Duncan ran. There were shouts around him. When he reached the paddock the shouting seemed like dimmest pigmy voices crying out in a storm. The horses screamed as they fought, with all the abandon of intolerable pain or outrage or desperation. It was this screaming most of all which numbed his brain, which struck him inert and strengthless. This, and a certain awe. Because of their strength, like Titans at the dawn of the earth. Because in their vicious and unguarded lunges, in the self-forgetful rending of their own bodies upon each other's teeth and hoofs, there was something maniacal; without any aim beyond extinction of the other, without any motive but a naked visceral hate. And because they seemed familiar no longer—not like horses any more, with qualities all but human. They were raging beasts with brains like acorns, pitiless and maddened and blind in their own and each other's blood.

Then he saw which would win. Jordan's horse was the heavier, but his weight did not help him. Chief was too quick. Even when they stood up like two great bears head to head, it was his own horse whose teeth more and more found the other's flesh. The sorrel neck was smeared with blood. When they wheeled with that unbelievable swiftness, like flashes of color in the dust, and their hind legs stabbed like pistons at each other's bodies, it was Chief whose hoofs seemed to punish, to slash and jar the sorrel horse.

Suddenly Duncan's inertia was gone. He felt an urge to scream his excitement. The men around him who rushed

in and waved and shouted and retreated again only stirred him the more. What happened next brought silent words into his mouth. Jordan's horse staggered and fell to his knees. Instantly Chief was half on his back. His teeth sank into the sorrel neck. A shrill hint of terror quivered suddenly in the stallion's cry. Duncan's lips parted around an irrepressible shout.

But the shout seemed to die, to vanish, before it reached even his own ears. He saw Chief's body start, violently, as though with the deafening force of the concussion itself. He glimpsed Dicky with the smoking gun. He saw Chief's body relax, then abruptly collapse onto the ground off the back of the upspringing stallion. Duncan lunged forward. But the stallion was there first, rearing, falling with front legs as stiff as poles upon the convulsing body. Duncan ran at him, screaming. Then he was sprawled on the ground, looking sidewise up at the plunging hoofs. A whip cracked. A final plunge and the horse wheeled proudly and trotted away across the paddock.

It was obvious. The last twitching muscle had come to rest. His shoulder, his side, lay in a brownish muck of dust and blood. Duncan did not get up; he crawled the brief space to the horse's head. The glass eye was open to the sun. The crude wedge, like an inlay of milky crystal, seemed dimmer, seemed to be melting into the smoky palor of the eye. Instinctively he raised his hand above it. Then very softly with the tip of his finger, he touched the lens. For a moment he fancied the eye had flinched, and he touched it again. Then he removed his hand quickly. He let it rest on the neck, on the hide that cleaved to his skin, on that perfect and startling immobility of things unaccustomed to death. Yet he was haunted with the feeling that somehow, in some dreamlike way, this was all unreal. Even the stillness of the flesh against which his living fingers throbbed. It all seemed in some nebulous way unlikely; or else impermanent, like the hard freeze that comes in extremes of weather. He looked at the bright mane flowing onto the ground; at the tail outspread like a fan of flax; and at the legs, poised, in arrested action. All these things suggested to him some strange and inexplicable error of his senses. So that the drawling matter-of-factness of a voice close by startled him like an assault.

"I warned you about that horse," Matt Jordan said. "Ain't nobody's fault but your'n." He held the quid of tobacco motionless, like a stone in his cheek. The two men with him, one a Negro, watched in silence. Dicky was not there.

He looked back at the horse. Then he was not troubled any longer by a sense of unreality. Not troubled by anything. Unless it was those hoof marks, like imperfect brands, which Jordan's horse had inflicted upon Chief's dead body. And even these were only hints, ghosts, of troubled recollections he might come to have. Now he felt simply still in all his body; nerveless, like his hand at rest on the horse's neck; drowsy, even, as if from the verge of sleep his mind formed meaningless images of the horse, the attentive men, the stable beyond the paddock fence. At length he made the effort and stood up. He was looking toward the stable. Dicky was coming out, accompanied by a Negro.

"We'll help you load him on the truck," Matt Jordan said. And after a moment, "We just as well get started."

Duncan did not look at him. He watched Dicky walking toward them with a certain jauntiness in his step even now.

"We better get the vet out here. That horse is pretty bad cut up." He spoke to his father. Then for the first time he looked at Duncan. Or rather his eyes moved glancingly across Duncan's face and body, even to his feet, as if they were of equal interest with the rest. With a toss of his head he threw the hair back from his forehead.

"It ain't like I wanted to shoot your horse, Welsh. But I ain't got any apologies."

Duncan stared at him.

"We'll help you get him away from here," Dicky said. "I ain't asking you to pay for the damage he done."

Duncan kept staring at him; until, even through the dullness he felt, he detected the gleam of belligerence in Dicky's eyes. His own hatred, however intense it might be, seemed very distant and cool just then. He only said, quietly:

"You move him yourself."

Then he turned and walked away toward the truck. He heard Matt Jordan's voice saying, "Aw, leave him alone," and Dicky's, "God damn if I will." But no one molested

him. Silence followed him to the truck. He got in and started the engine and drove back to the farm.

But he could not leave the horse in their hands. He found Logan. The old Negro looked at Duncan. His eyes lightened, and then grew dim.

"Yes sir, we'll go right on," he said softly, looking down.

"Any place'll do."

Then Duncan went to the house and went in and came out onto the porch again. He sat down on the swing and closed his eyes. With his foot he rocked himself back and forth. He was still there rocking when the truck came up out of the ford. He did not open his eyes when it passed.

PART 4

CHAPTER ONE

Now he built great fires in the evenings to warm himself. Often during the night he waked up cold and got out of bed to mend them. Then, crouched on the hearth with the idle poker in his hand and the winter darkness over his shoulder, that blaze seemed to him the most comforting of all things on earth. Almost he let it blister the flesh of his face and hands and knees. This time winter's coming had made only the difference to him that he was cold much of the time. It had not changed the quality of things. This time its coming, all in one night with rain and the blighting north wind, had not struck him as hateful, or even especially noticeable. The next morning he had observed that fall was gone, and that it was all of a sudden bitter cold. His thinking had been like that for many days. It was as if his mind grasped things from too great a distance to entertain them seriously. It was a kind of hazy unconcern for everything external to himself. Not that he was idle. He did tasks on the farm he had not done with his own hands for months; he invented jobs for the three of them. But he worked, as it were, mindlessly; without focusing not only upon the thing at hand but upon anything in particular. Even upon his companions; except at moments when he was pressed for an answer, or the need arose to speak

about some detail of the work. He noticed that Logan, at least, seemed inclined to make advances to him. But in spite of himself his responses were phlegmatic. Even in this thing which in the abstract he much desired he felt the familiar unconcern.

What interested him most just then were things related to the comforting of his body. This was something new. Before he had taken little notice of the almost constant feel of winter in the house, had given no more than passing attention to fires. Often he had preferred to sit shivering over a book through the hour until bedtime rather than take the trouble to build a fire. Now, inside the house at least, he found the cold intolerable. He gave priestlike attention to building his fires, and, once built, to mending them. He selected each stick of wood by size or greenness or dryness. He laid them in a calculated order, in just that proportion of large and small, or green and dry, that would make for both heat and duration. Then he sat back on his heels and watched the flames curl upward in darting vanishing tongues through the maze of logs.

It was the same with his meals. Where before he had hurried through their preparation, he now took time and trouble. He was at pains to have his fire just right. With the blade of a knife he brushed his cornmeal off even with the lip of his cup. Carefully with a spoon he measured out his salt and his lard, his coffee and his grits. Usually he had two slices of ham or side meat cut as nearly as he could to the same thickness. He tasted it to see when it was done as he wanted. When the meal was cooked he carried it in and ate from a table he had moved close to the fire. It gave him satisfaction when he had calculated just how much he would want.

Sometimes he tried reading. There was a great store of books in the house, all old. Some of them, inside stately leather bindings, were yellowing into obscurity. In large part they were forgotten names, extinct novels and epics and religious tracts. But there were Milton and Bunyan and Shakespeare; and a few volumes of Latin and Greek poetry. At first he tried unfamiliar books. But he found that his mind strayed, not to something else, just away from the book, and he would be contemplating the fire. He found one thing that held him for any length of time. It

was the Bible, Old Testament stories which his mother used to read to him in a dramatic voice. What he had brought to those stories as a child seemed still in small measure compounded with them. Reading them now he had flashes, brief renewals, of nearly forgotten experience. Again he felt his pity for Jonathan, and for the gloomy King Saul in his twilight world, who asked counsel not of the Lord but of one who had a familiar spirit. And his pity for the blind Samson, the waste of his immeasurable strength. And his joy to see Haman hanged from his own gallows. And Joseph in Egypt. Potiphar's wife. Still her image teased him, her hand on Joseph's garment, her whispered, "Lie with me." Her flesh was as smooth as pearl. Yet Joseph had not yielded. It was Duncan himself she had tormented, in the light of day, in his bed at night, while he had striven, thinking of her, to even desire the strength of Joseph.

These absorbed him at times. It was never for long. He lapsed into a thought whose only animation was the speechless tongues of the fire. He never knew how long it lasted; only that it stopped, as the thread of a prolonged stare may snap finally without cause. But not always without cause. There were on occasion moments when he felt a certain unrest, of the kind one feels under a fixed and unseen gaze. Once or twice he had actually to turn in order to dissipate the sensation. There were other moments, more frequent, when for an instant he was certain that he heard, faintly, Chief's shrill bugle note. Always the illusion called a procession of images down his mind. Always this procession left in its wake, deserted, one image prone and very still in the slanting early light. Here Jordan's face intruded often, with a backward flick of his head that tossed his long hair into place. At times Duncan needed something like force to turn these memories out of his head.

But this, all these things that interested or compelled him were like short or long moments of intense clarity which stood out from the rest of the day. Beside them, the work he did, the people he met, the things he heard about seemed distant and all of a color. It was in this mood, only a little disturbed, that he took the news about Aunt Virgy, that he attended her funeral. His self-reproach that he had not been to see her in weeks, not since the event, was all

from his lips. The thing did not seem quite real. Not at all when Logan told him. Only more so when he saw her in her coffin. Her face expressed nothing—scarcely even by its insignificance that peculiar placidness of the dead. She was something tiny and waxlike and still, something as frail as the skeleton of a bird over which a parched hide has been drawn. She hardly impressed the shroud that covered her; it alone might have been enough to hold such a body in eternal movelessness.

Washington Naylor had found her. Approaching her cabin he had not seen any smoke from the chimney. Then he saw that her door stood open to the bitter morning air. When he was sure she was not inside he started looking. He found her easily, by the crow. It was cawing. It flew up into a shattered cedar when he came toward it. She lay on the frozen ground only a little way off from her cabin. She did not have on a coat, even. She must have been there all night, because she was muddy, and the ground had been frozen since dark. Her tracks wandered about in circles where she had tried, in her blindness, to find her way back. Once she had missed the cabin literally by inches and then turned the wrong way. Finally there were the tracks where her strength had failed and she had crawled to this last place at the roots of the cedar tree. What she was doing outside in the first place, people could only guess. It had something to do with that crow. There were some feathers in the cabin, and some of her prettiest glass lay shattered on the floor. Outside her door there were feathers, and one or two had cleaved to her garments through all her wandering about. There was a peculiar cut in the back of her hand, with a little blood. Obviously the crow's beak had done it. Washington said the crow looked a little scraggly, like somebody might have had a hold of him with a mind to pick him. Washington got a good look at the bird. When he bent down and picked Aunt Virgy up—she was as light as straw—the crow fluttered down to the lowest branches of the tree. It followed him part of the way down the ridge, circling, cawing. Then it flew away. The Negroes all read some occult significance into the thing.

Her funeral, in the Negro church, was strangely quiet. She had no kin among them; at least none who knew it, or claimed kin to her. There was hardly a moan from the

congregation. No one but the preacher spoke, and he was subdued. Even Duncan, alone on his bench in the rear, like someone quarantined with a special kind of sorrow, shook his head when the preacher called on him to speak. It was unlike a Negro funeral; it was cold and reserved in its grief. Because it was not grief so much as a certain awed bewilderment that such a thing as her death could occur. They buried her on the hilltop outside the little graveyard where Duncan's fathers lay; in a plot of ground where other Negroes were long since buried. The watch and the picture and a few of the bright bottles they put into her coffin. A few more of the bottles they set on top of her grave, where they would be stolen finally. While the preacher said the last words they stood around with bowed heads and, some of them, with uncertain hands. Even after he dismissed them they walked away in silence.

Duncan did not go into the barn much any more. When he had to, he did his business hurriedly; he passed the empty stall without a glance. But one day he hesitated, and looked in. Then it struck him. It was like the instant of a heart's abrupt cessation, in which the senses of the body fuse, contract, into a single point of consciousness that is the last suspension over a void. In this place, were he to shout, his voice would add not even to the silence. The moment seemed timeless. He could not tell how long before, or just when, his mind renewed its separate awareness. But suddenly he was thinking, intent upon things distinguished from each other by quality and shape and cause. There was hay still in the rack. A bucket lay overturned and battered by a restless hoof. It had happened on that last night when, probably, the horse had grown tired of his confinement, had seen the dawn sifting in through the dusty windows, down the shadowy corridor, had tried in vain to spend the superflux of his strength upon the bucket, upon wild pitches of his head and whirls that brought his body hard at times against the dust-exploding walls. The door, which had been pushed shut, still had a broken latch. He had not relied on the frail latch; he knew Chief's habits too well. He had relied on a crosspiece, a heavy board that lay across the outside face of the door, secured at each end in strong wooden brackets. One of the brackets was ripped from the post, and the board lay on the floor as it had

fallen. It had taken a great, even deliberate, blow of the horse's body to break through. He stood contemplating it. Suddenly he started at a thought. "Too great," he kept saying to himself. He bent close to the spot where the bracket had been, felt it with his hand. Carefully he examined the post, the wall around it. With his strength he tested the bracket still intact. Then, rapidly at first, more slowly after a moment, he began to pace back and forth in the hallway, downheaded, as studious as a scout of the ground beneath him. He kicked at piles of straw. Now and then he stooped to make out some half-buried object.

The feeling, the possession almost, was at its height when Logan entered. So much so that it was only afterward, after Logan had showed him, walking away, a back stiffly sullen with outrage, with some pain perhaps, that Duncan understood the barbed crudity of his own question, and its effect, perpetuated in that back turned upon him in mid-answer:

"He ain't been here. He ain't been close to here since you hit him with that whip."

There was no help for it. He kicked thoughtlessly at a pile of straw. Somehow his motive of the preceding moments had collapsed. He felt, by contrast with that spell of burning and self-forgetful certainty, disheartened, flat. He imagined how the horse might have done it himself, with a blow of that broad chest or of his pile-driving hoofs. He looked after Logan. Then he thought it didn't matter. He remembered afresh the glimpse he had had of Wesley striding, still holding his hat, down the drive from Jordan's house.

It was cold that day, with gusty wind that swept down over the north bluff. The earth did not yield to his feet, no more than stone. Except for a dull green splash of cedar or laurel there was scarcely a perceptible break where the iron sky met the ridges. The wind did not die down and the air was more bitter than ever by night. He soaked up the heat of his fire. For a time, while it was new, he crouched beside it on the hearth. Later it sent him back to his chair.

It was after he had mended the fire once and settled down that he became conscious of a certain unfocused discomfort. It was mild at first, like the unrest that comes of

some trivial distortion of a pattern, a chair shifted from its accustomed place, a vase, even, removed out of its established context. After a little the discomfort became serious enough to tempt him out of his immobility, to look whether something was disarranged in the room. He let his gaze rove over the furniture. Then he located it, not so much with, as upon, his eye, the way a reflection at an angle too oblique will simply tease the vision. He could not have said why he did not look at it directly, as so sudden a shock would normally compel him to do. Unless it was that he had known, guessed, concurrently with the shock, what was the nature of its cause; and, knowing, stalled for time to fashion an attitude toward it. At any rate, the delay gave him an advantage. Aaron, beyond the window, did not yet understand that he was seen. Because, through the clouded pane, Duncan, even though at last he had cut his eyes around, appeared to be gazing elsewhere. This, and the fact that Aaron stood several feet back from the window in a darkness that blotted out the trunk of his body, gave Aaron a false sense of invisibility. But there was light enough on his face. Just light enough. This time Duncan's start escaped into his eyes. It must have been like a flash, for it struck Aaron too. His face changed. Or suddenly was different, rather, for the difference did not come of anything muscular. It was such a thing as may come with the shift of a light, or with a wink that clears the eye of a blur or an illusion. So that except for the shock of that first impression he would have thought that what he now saw—Aaron's face only a little crooked into a not unfamiliar half-grin—was the unaltered face of a moment before. Aaron gestured faintly with his head. Duncan heard his voice through the pane. He nodded and got to his feet.

Aaron had vanished. But not his face, that impression of it framed in the window, from Duncan's consciousness. The impression only, for the physical image itself of that moment had escaped now into the familiar memory of Aaron's countenance. What he retained was the vivid shock of it, and a different kind of image evoked with almost lightning clarity by what he had seen. Even in that first instant of startled nerves it had come to him this way, stayed with him now, like the context that gives meaning to an incoherent fragment. It was that Aaron was something, a spirit,

tossed there, suspended a moment in that tiny square of light by the north wind that whirled him in bitter and eternal darkness somewhere over the roof of the world. Not the expression of, but the agony itself which the name of loneliness could scarcely more than suggest, Duncan remembered; or felt, half felt, in a heart that no more than humanly ached with the pang of it.

He carried it with him to the door. The chill in the hall made him shiver. He was prepared almost for the blast of air that came as if from the lean body in the doorway.

"Cold," Aaron murmured, like the sound of the wind.

Under Duncan's stare he paused for a moment in the dark. It was not uncertainty; it was waiting, waiting to see. No more uncertain than was his subsequent movement, his heavy and uninvited footfall on the sill, on the creaking floor boards, and again his silence which left Duncan holding an open door to the wind. Then there was nothing for Duncan but to close it.

He did so with a sense of waking up to an unpleasant fact. It was as if the impression he had brought to the door with him had been carried clean away on the night wind, shut out, in place of the earthy and the unwelcome reality that had inspired it. As he looked at Aaron, the impression seemed to him as irrelevant as a foolish dream. Aaron bulked large in the house, like something that has no place indoors. He reduced it; as it were, shamed it out of that age-old and breathing eloquence that Duncan had heard always until now. His eyes looked yellow-green when the glow fell on them from the parlor door. Restless, they neither spared nor dwelled on anything, in the lighted parlor, down the dark hall where perhaps they were able to see. With equal brevity his glance fell, touched, on it all. Then, as if he had found nothing of value besides, he let his gaze settle on Duncan's face.

"Ain't never been in here before," he said. "Didn't know what it was like."

Through his disquiet, his irritation, Duncan managed an utterance.

"Been a long time since I seen you," Aaron said.

"Yeah, it has all right. Been too cold to stir around much lately."

Aaron was looking at him hard. As had happened in the

past Duncan had the sense that Aaron in spite of his nature was by an unlikely subtlety or intuition far ahead of where he appeared to be. Duncan waited. It was an uncomfortable time. But when it came it was not the kind of thing he had somehow expected.

"I want to get you to help me out."

Still Duncan waited.

"Over at the still. It's mighty near more than I can manage by myself . . . in the time I got, anyhow."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Got to be tonight. I'm running behind the way it is now."

Put straight this way, with insistence, it was hard to find an excuse he would accept. Duncan broke down in a pause. Aaron let him hang there, watching him, his gaze narrow, studious, impartial almost. It was Aaron who spoke first.

"What else you got to do? It ain't like there was nothing for you here."

"At least it's warm here."

"Warm over there too. I got a big fire going, right down in betwixt them hills where no wind can't hit. And they's plenty whisky."

Aaron met him everywhere with a rigor that both pleaded and insisted. He seemed ready if necessary to gain his end by sheer force of staying power. He won out. There was this at least to assuage Duncan's reluctance: that the house would be cleared of Aaron.

The blackness and the wind made the going painful. He felt his way across the footbridge. He could not see even the water beneath. There was no path worth the name. He stumbled often. There were times when he thought he was alone and had to call out for Aaron to wait, to show himself. Either Aaron could see in darkness like this, or else he had memorized the way, every turn, every bush and stone. He walked like a man in the daytime.

It was still in the hollow. He could hear the wind on the ridges above him. Somewhere about, it boomed like a distant cannon among the bluffs. Through intervals he could hear no sound besides but his own blundering feet. He became conscious of Aaron's silhouette ahead before he real-

ized there was a light up the hollow. The steep faces of the hillsides hove out of the dark, and the glow of light swelled like a ruddy and pervious cloud contained between them. A little closer, he saw the blaze, not yet faltering even for need of replenishment. Around it were the copper pot and the kettle, scattered barrels and kegs. The dog sat on his haunches in the firelight watching them with that indifference that was like the last glimmer of an eye under a drooping lid. Even at a distance the hollow seemed to grow warmer. Within the circle of light it was like a heated but drafty room. He went up to where the heat stung his face and held out his hands to the blaze.

"If you're cold, here's something for it," Aaron said. He brought a jug of whisky, itself like fire, from which they both drank, several times, swapping turns. He took it and set it on the ground away from the heat.

If Aaron was in a hurry his actions did not show it. For a while he stood around like a man unsure of his business. His eyes wandered without much point over the kettle, the fire, the litter of barrels and kegs. They settled at last on a shovel. He picked it up lethargically and stepped to where small piles of straw lay on the ground close together. He shoveled back the straw and thin layers of dirt, exposing the tops of barrels underground.

"You want to bring them buckets," he said.

The opened barrels breathed up a steam laden with the sweetish odor of mash. In silence they dipped the mash and poured it into the copper pot. Aaron seemed full of thought; weighed down with it almost, for his movements were deliberate. He said not a word until the pot was full and, with care, he had fastened down the top. Then he said, without looking at Duncan:

"Too bad about your horse."

Duncan looked at the fire. "Yeah," he murmured.

With the same deliberation Aaron took the shovel again and went to the fire and thrust the blade into the coals. He laid them, still burning, around the base of the pot. His face flushed when he bent to the fire; he did not turn it aside. Nor did he even make haste to withdraw from the heat once his shovel was filled. The flush grew deeper. At last his face seemed to burn with the lurid red of the coals.

"It was that Jordan killed him, wasn't it? That pretty

one." Aaron spoke into the fire. He finished his scoop with the shovel and turned with the live tongues leaping from the blade. "The one tosses his foretop."

His words had the effect on Duncan of conjuring up Jordan's image, made graphic in that gesture which was the epitome of his insolence. It was as though that image hung waiting always in the darkness of Duncan's mind, poised for that gesture should any cue call it suddenly into the light. "You know him?"

"Yeah, I know him. Sold him some whisky."

They were quiet again. Aaron leaned his shovel against a barrel. He turned to a pile of wood close by. Duncan helped him carry some and lay it on the coals against the pot.

"That was one fine horse," Aaron said. "Fine as I ever seen."

"Yeah."

They brought each another load of wood. Aaron placed it with care. But he turned away without a glance and took the jug and moved to the fire and sat down with his back to the pot. Duncan knelt just close enough to reach it when Aaron handed him the jug.

"Hard to take something like that. Man killed my dog once. You ain't never seen no dog like that one. He could stand flat-footed and eat right off a dinner table. Jaws like a bear trap." He paused. "Son of a bitch shot him."

Duncan swallowed from the jug. A kind of retching shudder followed in the wake of the whisky.

"That was when he shot his last one."

Aaron left it there, in germ, to burgeon in the heat. By the intensity of his silence he seemed through the interval to watch it narrowly among the flames. The fire had burned down; now it gave off a ruddy shimmering glow in which the eye, staring too long, lost its vision of substantial things. It brought a lightness, a hint of dizziness, to his brain. In a way it helped him with the contemplation of what it was that Aaron had hung in the flames before his eyes.

"That Jordan's a nasty kind of fellow," Aaron said slowly, almost dreamily. "I knowed it first time I set eyes on him. Kind of fellow a man can't take much of."

After a pause, "I know he is," Duncan murmured.

"You're the one ought to know. He's got a pretty good

score against you." Then, like a sleepy yet sharp proclamation of what was just then, privately, in Duncan's mind, "Your horse and your woman."

The inner start Duncan felt, touched, as it were, nothing more than his eyelids. He did not take his gaze from the fire.

"Maybe more'n that, for all I know," Aaron added.

"How did you know that?"

"About the woman?"

"Yes."

Aaron paused a second. "I heard it around."

"Who from?"

"Him. Most of it."

"Jordan?"

"He walked in here on me one day . . . wanting whisky. I like to shot him, first thing. I might ought to of. You don't want to let a man like him get nothing on you."

"And he just told you that?" Duncan looked hard. Aaron's face, turned to the fire, was as quiet, as nerveless as his voice. It held now only a trace of that almost lurid flush the heat had given it.

"He ain't a bit bashful. I ain't the only one he's told when he got a few drinks in his belly. I didn't have to ask him. Nothing only was he the one killed your horse. He told me the rest. He ain't a man to hide nothing." His words came with no margin of sound at all. The least failure of concentration would seem to make them inaudible.

"What did he tell you?"

"About your horse. How he was a killer ought to been shot a long time ago. Then about that gal."

"What about her?"

There was a little pause. "About what good stuff she was. Said you ought to be grateful to him breaking her in for you. Said he knowed she wouldn't stay, though, after what he give her."

Duncan waited. He felt a kind of numb impatience at the silent interval.

"I told him he better look out. He just laughed."

Still Duncan waited. But Aaron got up and stepped to the woodpile. It was as though his movement had fanned the air, had unlocked the sudden chill with which Duncan shivered. The jug felt cold to his hand; colder still to his

lips when he raised it up. Even the whisky in his gullet did not burn any more. Aaron, with wood in his arms, stood looking down at him across the fire. Duncan met his eyes with a sense of some yet unspoken, some rising intelligence. He fancied the eyes grew hot with the light of it. Then they blinked.

"He's getting it from her yet." Aaron simply tossed the wood, almost on his words, with an effect of vehemence his voice had not carried. It was like a small explosion of the fire, raining sparks in the air. Duncan's flinch was mechanical, instantly forgotten. Forgotten even was the burning spark which an instinctive blow of his hand had not swept from his trousers.

"He's lying. She's not around here any more."

"He's got her staked out someplace down in Nashville. He goes down there whenever he gets up a hard." Aaron blinked again. The action, though seemingly slow, had not even the effect of punctuating that luminous yellow stare.

"And he's . . . still . . ."

It was not more than a whisper. Yet Aaron took it up on the instant, with a thrust, with a crude barb in the one word:

"Yeah."

It was like starting at a pain, a puncture in a vessel swollen already with blood. Not in his face only, in his whole body he felt the flush of heat. There was a second of incoherence in which he was powerless even to flex a muscle. Aaron's gaze, as if in recognition, grew hotter suddenly.

"Don't let it stir you none, though. Your ass is a good a thing as they is to set on." It dropped in a flash, the discipline that had held the calm in his face. The flash was simply the abrupt and naked exposure, in eyes and nostrils, in lips and teeth, of what was burning beneath the calm. His voice was still controlled, but quick, lancelike. He seemed to lean toward Duncan with the words: "Set on it then, by God. Don't even stir. Spread your legs out and let him cut your cods clean off . . . if he ain't got them both already. What in the hell are you—"

"Shut your god-damn mouth." Duncan was on his feet, in the fire almost.

But Aaron's face was that of furious orgiastic pursuit.

"—a gelding? You know what I done to the bastard killed my dog?" His hands came up in a gesture violent with eloquence. "I taken him by the throat—"

He broke off there, at Duncan's cry, at the swift movement that brought them like glaring animals face to face.

"I told you, by God—"

It went from his face then, the way a curtain may be drawn suddenly over a burning window. It left Duncan hanging through a moment of startled and uncertain calm. Only for a moment. Aaron said:

"Don't turn it on me. I ain't the one."

They looked at each other in silence.

"I'll get him up here for you if you want me to."

"Get him, then."

"I'll get him tomorrow night."

They were caught up then in a moment when they did not know quite what to do with their eyes, and whether to speak. Aaron broke it by turning away to the woodpile. Wordlessly Duncan helped him carry wood to the pot and lay it on the fire. It was not until they were through, and then after a pause of the same awkwardness, that Duncan said:

"Can you?"

"What?"

"Get him up here?"

"Don't you worry none about that. You just come . . . around eight o'clock. I'll have him here." He paused. "If I can't work it I'll come tell you. But I can work it."

He sat down in front of the fire with his back to Duncan. The lazy movement, the nerveless slump of his shoulders, the set of his head in meditation upon the blaze seemed to remove him into the calm beyond doubt of an issue settled and final. Almost they defied Duncan to speak of it again. But Duncan heeded only in that he paused, that he spoke briefly and low.

"What if somebody knows where he's gone?"

"I ain't no fool," Aaron said.

This was to be the end of it, then, between them. He felt the sudden weight of the thing that he had been left alone with. He stood for a little while. Then he sat down a step away from Aaron, and fixed his eyes on the fire. He could not have said how long it was. But all of a sudden

Aaron's voice came to him, dropped on him, as over some invisible barrier.

"You ain't doing it right. You're looking in the wrong place. You want to look at him with that horse and that gal. Don't never let him stand still by hisself; he ain't nothing by hisself. Look at him shooting your horse and laying on your gal. And him nothing but a scrub and big rich lording it over everybody." Later, more softly yet, he added, "It ain't nothing like hard as you think it is, no way. It don't have to last but a second . . . if you don't want it to."

He said nothing else. Presently he reached for the jug and took a drink and handed it to Duncan. During the rest of the time they sat there Duncan felt his eyes only once. When he looked Aaron had turned away. Duncan stared at the fire. He drank often from the jug. He gazed at the fire so steadily that at last its image came to entangle, to confuse, like so many flickering shadows the darker visions in his head. Later, distantly, he heard Aaron telling him he might as well go. It was only when he stood up that he knew he was drunk. But standing there on his feet one thing made a clear impression. It was Aaron's long unsparing look. He met it as best he could, conscious that somehow, its full meaning escaped him at this moment. And Aaron was saying, as quietly as before:

"Don't forget what I told you."

He went off into the darkness. He staggered a little. Further on he turned and looked back, resting his hand on a tree. His vision, swimming until then, focused with a shock like that of eyes sprung open out of sleep. Though he stared for moments at the place, at its curling fires, its low roof of glowing smoke, it kept for him all the vividness of pain whose intensity will not recede. He turned with relief into the dark.

He got home by touch, by instinct, as a blind man goes. He realized, numbly, that he had fallen many times, that his hands and knees were bruised. How cold he was came over him in shuddering waves as he bent close to the near-dead ashes. He stood up with pain and went to his room and got into bed fully dressed. Sleep came like the instant blackness with which the covers settled upon his face.

It was already afternoon when he had opened his eyes.

Now, out of doors, more than an hour later, he had not gotten over that sense of dislocation which a late, heavy, and unusual sleep leaves in its wake. It was as though he had gained, or lost, a peculiar angle of vision upon the most accustomed sights, the most habitual actions. In a way he felt like a stranger to it all; yet a stranger intimately briefed, foreknowing every detail that now confronted him. He went about with the continuous expectation that some natural jar involved in movement would tumble things into place. Not that his mind was cloudy. Rather it seemed too clear. From the moment of his waking up, of feeling his bruises and his body fully dressed, he had envisioned it all with the clarity of present action. Envisioned not only the scene of last night but that, as it must be, of the night to come. Both of them he saw from the same peculiar angle, set in too bold relief to be entirely real. So that in spite of their clearness, in spite of what he knew, he felt somehow unrelated to them; as if from the dark he watched them acted out inside an area of vivid light.

The smoke from Logan's chimney kept reminding him that his wandering about in the gray wind, to the sheep shed, to the tobacco barn, was without purpose. Still it was by accident that he found himself at last moving toward the house. He was halfway down the slope when he first became conscious of a difference in the look of the place. His impression did not pass with the moment; did not pass even with his scrutiny of the high weathered face of the building, of the windows, the roof. It was not any special feature, or any hint of dilapidation, which at the end of a minute's puzzlement brought fresh into his mind the word "disuse." A disuse in fact not even recent. It was such as a stranger might have thought had accumulated with years.

This impression stayed with him to the door. It was dissipated by the start of recognition that someone had entered since he came out. The door stood open, as he would never have left it in such weather. This knowledge was that expected jar to his brain, repeated with emphasis as he stepped over the sill. His eyes went to it as straight as if it had been a flame of fire. Leaning as it was crosswise of the frame, it all but blocked the parlor door. So placed, where blindness itself must stumble upon it, the gun was

more than a challenge; in its mockery of alternatives it was an open taunt. It occurred to him that this was what he had missed last night in Aaron's final look. But that meant nothing now, Aaron and his bloody shirt. It made no difference now that he waved it, or why he waved it, or whether all he said was true, or how many taunts he cast. This realization came to Duncan like so much clear light admitted suddenly into his brain. He saw that Aaron, however he may have schemed and goaded, was finally nothing more than an accident in the matter. The thing was his own, in him, to be acted out by its own necessity. To this Aaron's taunt meant nothing. He could pick it up, the polished steel and wood that was left of it, with no meaning at all but that he was oddly fascinated. It was as heavy as a bar of iron; it reached nearly to his shoulder. There were large twin hammers and obscure designs in the metal under the breach. He broke it and withdrew the big pinkish shells and felt their weight. Then he put them back and closed the breech. He leaned the gun against the wall inside the parlor door.

The house was like a tomb. He built another great fire and squatted in front of it. His legs grew numb with the posture, but he did not stir. At the point of pain the mounting heat still did not drive him back. He moved only when he became aware that someone was knocking, had been knocking for some minutes at the kitchen door.

"I'd like to talk with you a minute, Mister Duncan," Logan said.

Duncan let him into the dim kitchen. At first the old Negro looked weakly about him; then through the door into the gray stillness of the dining room. Finally his eyes came back and rested on Duncan's face with the lightness of apology.

"We's going to leave you this time." He waited.

It was a moment before Duncan could understand even what he meant.

"We's made a new trade for next year."

Duncan nodded his understanding. Logan did not know what to say next. He dropped his eyes. Then:

"I wouldn't of done it but for Wesley. He done made the trade. Wouldn't be nobody but just me up here by myself. I wouldn't even be no use much." He paused uneasily.

His eyes kept climbing to Duncan's face and resting there a moment and falling again. "If you wants, I'll stay on and see your tobacco through. That'll give you time to get somebody."

His words, his manner had the air of a plea for forgiveness. Duncan saw it woodenly, as a kind of irrelevance, even. Just as the question of who they had traded with, to which he knew the answer already, which he did not ask, seemed irrelevant now. He managed only to say, "I'd be glad if you would."

Then he noticed that Logan's eyes had ceased to waver, had settled on his face. A look not bold, just humbly studious, as if it doubted its own perception. The trace of a start that came into Duncan's eyes was enough to turn it.

"You ain't feeling sick, is you?" Logan murmured.

He was quiet after Duncan's answer. He became almost awkward in the silence before he took his leave. Through the window Duncan watched him limp away and out of sight beyond the corner of the house. Only then did the tone of his last inquiry awaken, very quick and faint, like the echo of an echo in Duncan's mind, old and gentle reverberations.

At dusk, reckoning the hour, he started the clock. He sat down conscious of the heavily measured seconds and of a sense of urgency. But the thing would not come into focus. He could see it only in fading glimpses, like spots of light that blur in the direct glance of an eye. Instead, with swelling insistency, the visions flooded up from behind. Without bidding or seeming order they rose like spirits released from a pit. Some paused for his contemplation. One flared like dawn in his mind. He saw himself a child running in the green and golden light of morning; crying, shouting for joy to the hills and the sun in a voice that hushed the shrill roosters. It was all for him, he was king: field and orchard and bluff, the very morning itself; whatever spoke to his senses. Then the image drifted past. There came family and friends and acquaintances. Some had no names; some were dead. Nettie was one who paused, looking as she had looked that day by the dam, gravely innocent, like a musing child. And there was his first wife with the cool early freshness that had beguiled

him. And his father. He was young; his hands had tempered nerveless strength that might have come to them at a forge. Then, suddenly, they were resting upon his lap in the warmth of the fire, soft and wasted and uncertain; they lay without comment upon the mute disquiet that absorbed him by the hour. And there was Garner, preaching; and Margaret Mary. There was Jordan's image, but unfocused, like something through a wavy pane. Then it was gone, as though his effort to fix upon it had at one stroke cleared the air. The details of the room, the ticking of the clock, came sharply against his senses. He shifted in his seat. He stood up and peered at the dim face of the clock.

After that he did not sit still any more. He got up often and looked at the time. At last he did not sit down again; he paced about in the failing light of the fire. He did not look directly at the thing, even in the last hurtling minutes. He remembered what Aaron had told him—to think only of the grievances. He returned to them many times. But somehow even the image of the horse lying dead seemed to pale under the mounting pressure upon his brain. More than with any of these he was absorbed with simple problems in subtraction afforded by the shrinking face of the hour. Then he was watching the minute hand touch on seven-thirty. When it struck he turned and put on his coat and picked up the shotgun and stepped out into the wind.

The cold air and the effort of making his way relieved his busy mind. Somewhere deeper, so muffled that only ripples like faint spasms of nausea washed against his consciousness, the ferment went on. Groping, staring up the hollow ahead, he saw at last the black entangled silhouettes of trees. But he did not pause in the instant of pulseless silence that fell upon his heart; not in the ensuing confusion that all but drowned whatever thoughts he had. One idea came clear out of the moment—that he must be quick. He embraced it like a saving grace dropped on him from the sky. It was for him then the one fact, the one need, obscuring what waited at the center of that brightening glow of light. He was hurrying. Now and then he stumbled with a clashing of bushes and leaves that alarmed him distantly. He saw the fire. It flickered and vanished and flared in the

shifting spaces between the swimming tree trunks. He saw the slopes on either side of him, then the shadowy ground under his feet.

He saw the two figures in the firelight. The sight struck him with the need to stop, to collect himself. His pace diminished, hesitated. It was but a second: time in which to see that the dog alone, seated in moveless houndish indifference on his haunches, was aware; that Jordan's back was toward him; that Aaron appeared absorbed beyond suspicion in whatever might be their relationship. And time for a single strong impression. It was that the flickering silence in which they seemed posed so nervelessly was the silence as of a void, without even medium for sound, to which a voice however strained could contribute only its nothing.

He entered the clearing. He felt unable to move faster than this tedious pace. The weight of the gun alone, which now he held across his hip, seemed to call upon the last of his strength. The warmth of the fire touched his flesh, became heat, and yet did not drive the chill from it. Even now, speaking distance away, he was not seen. Or was, must be, seen only by Aaron, who yet had not allowed in his face so much as a hint of his knowledge. Jordan's voice sounded, startlingly clear. It was then Duncan drew the hammer. Jordan did not hear it above the sound of his voice. But almost within the instant he got the shock from somewhere, from Aaron's face, or simply out of the air. It was too late for his name, hoarse in Duncan's throat, to take him utterly by surprise; he was already wheeling. His hat fell off. He came half to his feet, and settled back again. Caught so, he stared out of an unexpected face, a face that seemed scarcely capable of his too familiar insolence.

"Stand up." Duncan knew it had to be now, without a pause. But Jordan had not stirred.

"Stand up."

It was as if this repetition of sound had touched a central nerve in Jordan's face. It made a difference. Instantly there was a familiar shade in his expression.

"I ain't getting up."

"God damn," Aaron said.

Duncan pulled the trigger.

The shot simply slammed Jordan backward off the keg. He gave one short guttural cry; his knees came up convulsively. There was an instant when it seemed he might roll over onto his face. The strain broke into a kind of violent muscular flutter. Then, with a wild sweep of his eyes, he was still.

There was a merciless ringing in Duncan's ears. For him it might have been the only sound of the shot. He had not moved since he pulled the trigger, even to lower the gun. But Aaron had. He stood over Jordan's body. He turned to Duncan. He said quietly:

"Don't never look at they face. You don't never forget it if you do."

He waited a moment. With an effort Duncan lowered the gun and looked at him. He saw Aaron's face in the act of a change subtle but marked, a change distantly familiar.

"You done good. You give me a scare, though, for a minute." He looked intently at Duncan. "You ought to done it quicker. I had him all set up for you. When you got a thing like that to get done it don't make no difference which way he's looking. It don't make him no difference now."

Aaron did not grow awkward in the glazed and persistent stillness of Duncan's look. He added, with assurance, as if the matter were one for disinterested speculation between them:

"All the same, it's a satisfaction the way you done it. I reckon I'd of done it that way myself."

Then his eyes brightened with a suddenness that stirred Duncan in his trance.

"We got to get him away from here."

Duncan watched him numbly. Aaron went to the foot of the slope and took up a pick and shovel and came back to where Jordan lay. He studied a second, looking at the tools. "Got to be a long way off," he said. "How we going to tote them all?" He dropped them abruptly, and looked around him. His solution was wire and a heavy pole. Duncan turned away from what seemed—in the moment before he saw the absurdity of his scruple—an indignity. He forced back his revulsion. He bent down and took a piece of the wire and tied the feet together. In spite of himself his eyes kept running to Jordan's face, the fixed eyes, to the

dark tattered smear that covered half the chest of his jacket. Then he quit resisting. He stared with the morbid consciousness of what a change he had wrought.

"This ain't something to forget about," Aaron murmured. He held up Jordan's hat, then stuffed it into his pocket.

They hoisted the pole. He felt the corpse brush his leg. He had the pole set on his shoulder before his eyes dropped to Jordan's face staring upside down at him. The mouth had opened; blood had run out. But it was not this which brought the surge of nausea hard into his gullet; it was the sense that this face, gap-mouthed and bloody and white-eyed, was not a face he knew. He stood limp, sickened, in a moment of full conviction that this was not Jordan, that this was an unknown man he had killed without any reason.

He felt a tug at the pole. He was conscious that Aaron was looking back at him.

"Let's swap ends," Aaron said.

They changed around, and Aaron led off. The weight of the pole and shovel seemed unbearable. His eyes fastened to the back of the hanging head and the long hair that all but trailed the ground. The body swung gently with their movement. He was glad when the darkness blinded him. He simply followed the pressure on his shoulder, staggering at times, conscious of a weakness that threatened always to buckle his knees beneath him. Through it all he felt the body shivering the pole, jarring it at moments when the head, like a warning to his steps, grounded or struck against an unseen impediment. And always Aaron went in silence, invisible, as relentless as an element or a deep and urgent passion drawing him after it.

It was long before they turned and climbed at a gentle angle up a hillside. He was gasping. He felt the wind. Then Aaron came into dim relief against the sky. They entered a thicket of laurel where they had to bend low, dragging the body, and where the wind hummed in the leathery foliage. They dug the grave in a tiny clearing, as deep as they could in the rocky ground. Their tools glinted dully, and clicked in the wind-hushed silence. Aaron close beside him seemed only more substantial than a shadow. They laid in the body, already stiff. Aaron dropped the hat in.

They filled the grave. Aaron stomped it flat. He strewed it with leaves and brush and rocks. He slid the pole into the thicket. They left without a word.

Duncan came shuddering into the firelight. His clothes were moist with sweat beneath his coat. He pressed close to the fire. After a moment he sat down heavily. With full eyes he watched Aaron walking slowly, down-headed, back and forth about the clearing. At last he picked up the shotgun and pocketed the empty shell and put a fresh one in the chamber. He came up to the fire. He did not speak at first. Then he said:

"You want to wash them hands off good 'fore tomorrow. They's some on your breeches too. You better burn them up when you get home."

Duncan stared at his hands, his trousers, wondering how, when, it had gotten there. He heard Aaron say, meditatively, "I got some myself." He kept staring at the smears on his hands. He grew conscious of the heat, as if the fire had flared suddenly in front of his face. His nausea took him by surprise. He barely had time to lurch sideways and heave onto the ground.

He lay there on his hands and knees a long time in a fit of retching. When it was over he lay resting on his elbow, empty, panting, his eyes shut. He would have settled onto the ground except he felt cold. When he opened his eyes there was a bucket of water beside him. He closed them again, vaguely warmed by the gesture. Later, Aaron spoke:

"Better now, ain't it? It can go hard with a man when he don't know."

Duncan raised his head. Aaron, seated now, had been gazing at him with an expression that dimmed his yellow eyes almost beyond recognition. He withdrew it from Duncan then, and let it fall on the fire.

"I recollect when it come to me first. It was of a afternoon . . . hot July. I went and laid in a spring. I laid there plumb till night, and on. The little beasts come down to water. They seen me and run off scared. I recollect one, particular: a little old half-growed squirrel. He set right up and blinked 'fore he run off. They didn't get no water that evening."

Duncan watched him. He watched him a long time without moving, without seeing Aaron stir. He looked at

Aaron's hand. Even the back of it was smeared. At length Duncan sat up. Still they were quiet. He saw the dog get up and stretch. He wondered if it had so much as raised its head at the shot. As the fire burned down they moved closer to it. At the last he could feel the very warmth of Aaron's body close to his side.

When they did get up Aaron said, like the consequence of something that had run underneath the silence:

"But a man gets used to a thing."

Duncan waited for something else. Already he was feeling the coldness of the long walk home, the chill of the house. When nothing came, he said:

"I'd like to help you, whenever you want me to. Come get me any time."

"I'm obliged to you," Aaron said. There was the ghost of tenderness in his face.

CHAPTER TWO

He did not sleep that night. He had got into bed with all the certainty of exhaustion that oblivion would follow. Instead, this restlessness came. At last he got up heavily and built a fire. But in the heat, in his chair, he rested no better. The first grayness of dawn at the windows did not relieve him. It was then, in fact, in the slow-increasing light, that this unrest achieved utterable clarity. Through the window he saw the day looming, swamping the shadows that hid the separate features of the earth. He felt himself suddenly threatened. He remembered his hands, his trousers. He took off his trousers and burned them in the fire. He went into the kitchen and washed his hands, his nails, his wrists; until at last when he held them up to the window they gleamed palely in the light. Comforted, he thought of his need for food. But when he had prepared something he could not eat it.

It was full sunless morning. The thought that he must go out, as always, lest they notice, increased his exhaustion. He got his coat and hat. In the doorway, in the shuddering cold that met him, he stopped. He turned back and went to a mirror and studied his face. He could not have said what he expected it might show; his face felt somehow as rigid as a mask. What he did see was a hag-

gardness, a deep pallor that weakened even the blue irises of his eyes. In their dimness they seemed all but transparent. And the scar he had gotten on his temple that day stood out of the flesh like a small purplish wen. Almost he could see in the mirror the shades of indecision come and go across his face. Then he resolved not to go—for now. He felt unsure of his face, his manner. Besides, it was only yesterday that Logan had thought he looked sick.

He lay down, finally. At length his unquiet muscles grew still. But his mind ran. At Jordan's house they were wondering now. His body was deep in that laurel thicket, under the dirt and rocks. Better if it were in the pines, smothered under the resinous scent of needles. If, after all, Jordan had told somebody, or somebody had seen him turn off the main road. And the shot. It must have sounded like thunder out of that hollow, carried for miles on the wind. He sat upright. He got up again and paced and mended the fire continually. Each time he raised up from the fire he felt the sweat cold on his face.

Wesley's wife came to see about him. A little sick, he told her. He needed only a day or two indoors by the fire. He watched her across the yard and up the slope. He went to his bed again. This time his exhaustion flooded even his mind.

It was night when he waked up. Yet there was a flickering light on the ceiling. He realized that there was a fire in the little fireplace opposite the foot of his bed. For the moment after waking he rested, in abeyance, warm in the sense of being watched over. Gradually he made out a distinct shadow on the ceiling above him. It shifted slightly. He sat up. Aaron, squatting before the fire, looked around. Duncan gazed at him a little dizzily. It all came back, as sudden, as startling, as Aaron's presence there. Aaron stood up.

"You ain't looking so good."

His voice was an instant comfort. It banished at once the faint instinctive distress at his intrusion; it eased, made coherent the hot rush of thought that must have showed in Duncan's eyes.

"You're making yourself sick," he said. "You ain't got nothing to worry about."

"Have they started looking yet?" He felt lightheaded but he stayed upright.

"I ain't seen no sign."

"What about the shot, if somebody heard it?"

"Didn't nobody hear it. That hollow muffled it up. Wind was blowing hard south, anyhow. Ain't nobody much down that way to hear. Did, they wouldn't know where it come from."

Patiently, as though Duncan had been a child, Aaron laid his fears. All of them, until, in a pause, Duncan was left with a sense of release, of absolution almost. In this sudden bath of innocence he floated. It glowed in his voice when he said:

"It's all right then. Sit down, there's a chair right there."

"You better set back yourself. You ain't looking none too good."

The lightness was gone. He felt as if he were pressed down against the pillow. Aaron, humped forward on the chair, as though it were not a chair at all but a keg he sat on, seemed a distance away. It was not without strangeness, his presence there; not without a sense of peculiar dislocation. But it was a comfort which Duncan watched jealously, hardly dared to close his eyes upon.

"Why don't you stay the night?" he murmured.

"I reckon I will," Aaron said.

Later, there was only Aaron and himself and the fire-light, without walls or ceiling, surrounded everywhere by soundless stretches of darkness. The two of them might have been something fixed in a dim drifting star which moved without sign of motion through space, through eternity. He lay there soothed, drowsy in the illusion. But it faded . . . or rather was transmuted. He was stirred by Aaron out of an unshapen dream of ugliness which made him writhe, of uncleanness which stopped his breath, which made him gasp for want of air. Aaron gave him a drink of water. But it came back, with additions. Through it all, as through a miasma, he saw the familiar faces, but distorted now, grown vile, hideous in the last festering stage of putrefaction. His lids would not shut out the sight; it met him wherever he turned. Aaron's hand was on his shoulder.

"You better stay awake a while. You sound like something out of the pit." He drank again. Aaron put more wood on the fire and crouched in front of it. Duncan watched his shadow on the ceiling.

"We didn't make a mistake; it *was* Dicky, wasn't it?"

"Sure it was Dicky."

"We should have put him in the pine thicket." Aaron's shadow did not stir. "Maybe we ought to move him."

The shadow stirred a little. "You just as well to quit fretting yourself. He's in a good place; won't nobody find him where he is. Once you done a thing like that you best leave it be."

He slept again. The dream came back. But this time, like one on his guard, he waked up instantly. When he opened his eyes the shadow had moved to one side. He raised his head to see Aaron reclining on a stiffened arm. Suddenly Duncan was moved almost beyond the fear that had chased him out of sleep. He gazed with a different kind of fear, an emotion into which a certain pity was mixed. Aaron's posture, his body upheld by the one lean arm, bespoke a weariness final and terrific; an unending nightly watch against what alone to others brought refreshment, brought innocence. So that though his mind might droop at times, might creep like a wheel in sluggish water, he never let it wholly stop. He did not move while Duncan looked at him. The shadow was as still as ever when Duncan had lain back on the pillow again. For minutes it did not cease to hold him as rapt as if the future were spelled out within it. Finally it shifted. Duncan said:

"Why don't we go off someplace. Like South America. Life's a lot different down there; it's a new country. Part of it's not even settled yet . . . miles and miles of forest. We could forget about all this. Maybe the people down there haven't caught up with themselves yet." The idea flared as he talked. But Aaron's tone, like his words, darkened the moment of fancy.

"Suits me. But I done been down there once."

"Didn't you like it?"

"Yeah, I liked it all right. It's a good place."

"Why'd you come back?"

"I don't know, I just come."

"You wouldn't want to go back, then?"

"Sure. Suits me all right. Be better now I wouldn't be by myself."

After a pause he said, "We better not run off too quick, though."

"Yeah."

That sense of a brightness on the horizon was not entirely gone. He tried not to look at it too directly, not to hear more than the assent in Aaron's words. He turned his head away from the shadow on the ceiling. Deliberately, like something one must gaze at obliquely to see, he kept the little glow visible in his mind. But it glimmered off and on. Then it went out in the dark.

He was conscious, later, and soothed by the knowledge, that Aaron stood over him. Once more there was a gap. The dream started again. He waked up turning in his bed. He saw that it was daylight, that Aaron was gone. He put his feet on the floor and stood up dizzily.

Aaron had left fires burning in the bedroom and in the parlor, and wood stacked beside the hearths. He had even made coffee that was still warm on the stove. Duncan poured a cup and carried it, spilling some, to his chair by the fire. He sat and waited.

Logan came to see about him. He looked with open concern into Duncan's face. At first Duncan would not hear of his offer, his insistence, that Della come. Then, with sudden fear that it might seem strange, he agreed. He waited in vain for what he wanted to know. His most leading questions, his scrutiny, found not a hint of it in Logan. Nor in Della, whose slowness permitted him to dare more. This relieved him for a while. Not for long. Again he lay in his bed, waiting. The afternoon stretched out before him. He watched it through the window. Now and then a rectangle of tired sunlight fell upon the floor only to be snuffed out presently by the all-enfolding grayness. He waited for the night. Aaron would come then; he would know. Meanwhile the sound of Della in the house, her shuffling movements, her old low humming, rankled in him. The time came when in the urgent grip of nerves he longed to scream at her to be still, to go home, out of his hearing. Even when he grew drowsy at last in the endless afternoon, he dared not give in to it, not with her in the house. Fat and stupid as she was she became like a threat, almost. In moments

when he had to fight back encroaching sleep, a rage, a hatred toward her came over him and left him stiffly wakeful for a little. He lay facing the window, pretending sleep each time she came with flapping slippers into the room. From the parlor, more dimly from the kitchen, he heard her mournful lung-deep humming.

At dusk she brought a tray of food.

"You just eat all that," she said, "and sleep out that there fever. You be done well 'fore you knows it."

But he looked after her with silent venom. When the door slammed behind her he lay back and closed his eyes.

Aaron came early after dark. Duncan sat up with a start of nerves at the sound of the opening door. Then he felt comforted. Aaron's unhesitant steps in the hall brought relief in the very face of the news he might have. He stood beside the bed. His expression appeared to be softened with pleasure at what he held out to Duncan—a sealed half-gallon jug of whisky.

"I brung you a present. It's a little I been aging. This here'll knock that fever."

The neck of the jug was warm where Aaron's hand had held it. All at once the gift seemed a great thing. He looked up at Aaron with a gratitude that displaced even the urgency of the question in his mind.

"I hate to take what you've been saving for yourself."

"This here'll get you well. You still ain't looking none too good."

Aaron unsealed the jug for him and watched him drink. "That's some good, ain't it?" he said. Duncan breathed once before he looked up with the warmth rising in his face.

It was minutes later, while Aaron was making up the fire, when Duncan voiced his question. Aaron did not pause at his work. He knew only that the news was getting around, that old Jordan had seen the sheriff. Besides this he knew nothing.

"And them bastards don't know nothing neither. That sheriff don't even know where to commence. Did, he'd done been out here. You just as well to quit worrying about it."

Again, in that patient way, he answered all of Duncan's fears. His unconcern was infectious. Little by little Duncan felt a lightening of his oppression. With his last word on

the subject Aaron had banished it entirely. The pause was like the relaxation that follows a strenuous effort. They began to talk again, haltingly at first. But slowly their spirits warmed. They talked then not as they had ever talked before; they talked about the future, about South America. Now Aaron seemed taken with the idea. It was Colombia where he had been. Memories of it on his lips were like memories of childhood, full of life and vivid color and a wild elemental freedom. What he described, things Duncan had read, the timbre of their voices, all gave blood to the vision they conjured up. That its features never grew entirely distinct did not trouble them; they never paused for that. There was so much to look at; so many countries, so much strangeness, so much unblemished wilderness. And there was the ocean, Aaron said; the long stretches of deserted coast, the swelling, beating waves. Each particular image they left hanging, among the things to choose from when the time came. Through it all Aaron's eyes were alight in a different way, with a brightness like that of new-kindled fires. Only gradually, when silences began to fall, did the light in them deepen. Duncan heard intruding into their voices the hollow and conscious effort of will. Then they were quiet.

The fire had burned to embers; the room was lighted dimly, as if from no particular source, by a smoke-darkened lamp off the blind side of his head. Again he had that sense as of the two of them afloat within a wandering sphere of light. He closed his eyes. There was still something left of the vision they had raised. He kept it warm in his mind. It eased for him the tension, the smothering oppression of the long night. Even when he slept it clouded out the ugliness of his dreams. The times they broke into talk were like scattered periods of refreshment. Once Duncan said abruptly:

"A month ought to be long enough to wait."

"Ought to," Aaron said. "But you can't never tell."

Again Duncan was asleep when Aaron left.

He felt better that day; not less nervous, but stronger. His fever had all but gone. He dismissed Della early. She had heard the news; she had volunteered it. For all his readiness it caught him off guard. Momentarily he was afraid she had noticed the start in his face. He covered

himself with questions. But she had seen nothing. What she knew was only what Aaron had prepared him for. She followed up with groundless speculations, her own and other people's, while he sat hiding his restlessness. Her final comment was:

"Done got to where a person ain't safe outside in the dark no more."

The incident made him more nervous. First, because she had come, readily, even this close, had dismissed the chance of an accident. But more, because he had felt himself blench at the simple mention of the news. He tried, in imagination, to accustom himself to the sound of it in other people's mouths.

The weather had grown sharply milder overnight. In the afternoon the sun came out and shone bleak on a spongy water-seeping earth. He looked out with foreboding upon the thaw, the change. He fancied in it some unreadable meaning for him. He saw a lone crow come and perch vividly on the dead chestnut at the top of the hill. He watched it until after a long motionless stay it flew out of sight. The sun was setting clear. He waited for night, for Aaron to come.

He heard it as he stood watching the sun go down. He got to the side window in time to see the car dip into the ford and slowly plow the water across. He recognized that it was Garner. He felt the withdrawal of blood from his face. He hurried, and stared in the glass at his pallor, his tousled hair. He seized the brush. In the kitchen he splashed cold water on his face and dried it harshly, thinking that Garner of all people would come nearest to the truth.

Margaret Mary looked at him sharply after her greeting. He was glad for the shadows in the hall. Garner stood behind her shoulder with his arms full of groceries.

"I saw Logan in Brady," she said. "He told me you were sick."

"Just a spell of flu. I'm about all right now."

"You don't look all right. You look like you ought to be in bed."

Garner started for the kitchen with the groceries. Duncan went with his sister into the parlor. He set straight to mending the fire.

"I've never seen you so pale. Have you been much sick?"

He felt her sympathy. "Just a hard case of flu," he said into the fire. He had in his mind an impression of her face, an impression of gentleness that consorted strangely with the outward toughening rigidity which seemed to hang, as it were, without a grip upon the taut surface of her face. He remembered that afternoon on the porch. He felt drawn to her; he longed to look squarely into her eyes. But when he raised up, Garner was in the room, standing in a quiet like that of meditation. He had not yet taken off his overcoat.

She might have sensed the rise and fall of that impulse in Duncan. Her tone more than canceled the mild reproach in her words:

"We were expecting you for Christmas dinner."

He was conscious of Garner. Then he was conscious that Margaret Mary's words offered him a certain margin of safety. "I should have let you know. I've been sick the whole week . . . almost." Instantly he regretted he had said it. It was less than a week—wasn't it?—since he had been to Brady, had met people he knew, whom Garner knew. He turned and poked the fire. For once he wished that Garner would talk. Margaret Mary lit one lamp and then the other and the room was flooded with light. Garner took off his overcoat. With meditation he laid it across the back of a chair. By the care with which he arranged it he might have been balancing in his head a difficult equation.

"Oh, Duncan."

She stood with the tips of her fingers resting eloquently on the big mahogany desk. Her eyes roved from object to object about the room. "Doesn't Della *ever* come?"

"She was here today."

"You have to make her do it. Just look. Everything's dusty. And cobwebs, even. Why, it looks like nobody's lived here for months." But when she looked at him there was more sadness than reproach in her face. He felt again her sympathy. But it was like a feeble flash of warmth to the chill he felt in the clear scrutiny of Garner's eyes, which fastened as if in search of meaning upon the cobwebs, the dusty places. Upon him, finally. He had yet a moment in

which he sensed with dull satisfaction the gulf between man and wife. She added softly, "All these nice old things."

"I'll have her come clean up," Duncan said.

After that he attended with difficulty to what she was saying. Increasingly Garner's silence unnerved him. When finally he did utter with a certain oblique suddenness some trivial remark there was something forced in his tone. Then Duncan glimpsed in a subtly darkened exchange of glances a tension between him and his wife. In a moment of relief he read on Garner's face an inchoate anger that yet was timid, uncertain of itself. Again he felt drawn, protected by her. In the next moment she confirmed his inference, confirmed it even through the alarm with which he saw her stand up and say, looking at him, "I'm going to fix you a good supper." Because she followed it with a pause directed not at him in which a warning and a rebuke not entirely gentle hung all but spoken on the air. Then she went out of the room.

He looked after her with the sense that she had left him in the protection of her blessing. Garner's face was averted downward, fixed on one of his softened workman's hands. Yet without the flicker of a nerve he gave the impression of inwardly biting his lip. Duncan's uneasiness renewed itself. He heard faintly noises from the kitchen. The two of them seemed to be listening together. When Garner looked up his face was composed, like a face with an answer in it. It had grown fatter. The chin seemed not so long, the eyes less wide apart. Now instead of the line of tight compression, the pink fullness of his lips was visible. But not in relaxation. The impression was that the hard certainty in his face had in some unexpected quarter run against an all but invincible doubt; yet a doubt which even now he persisted in refusing. This was what Duncan glimpsed, a petulant disharmony under a placid surface. Once more Garner made some trivial remark. Duncan answered and watched, matching his tone to Garner's. Especially he watched the lips. He saw them tighten, then form around a voice in which the minute shade of a difference did not escape him.

"We were sorry to hear about your horse."

"Yes." He hung in the pause. He looked out into the dark hall.

"It's too bad. I've heard he was a fine horse."

"Yes, he was." He started to add "It was hard to take," then caught himself. Instantly he wished he had said it. That would be the way—with boldness.

"They shot him, didn't they? Over at Jordan's?"

"He got out. He was fighting that stud over there." But Garner knew this already, must know it. And he was regarding Duncan with eyes vacant but for a look of professional sympathy. His lips moved in silent indication that now he understood.

"And the old man shot him."

The transparency of it was startling. Garner had guessed, with all the confidence of his mechanic's knowledge. Duncan had an impulse to leap the steps over which Garner would so crudely push him. But a weight of instinct held him back. "No," he said. He made a powerful effort to look full at Garner. "It was his son."

"Oh." And after a pause, "Doesn't he have two sons?"

"It was Dicky." He blinked his eyes against the flash of hatred he felt. He could tell that through the veil of innocence Garner was reading him; that he took satisfaction in this pause which at any instant must close upon the news that he certainly had heard. But Garner broke it with unexpected words:

"It's too bad. I guess he hated to have to do it. There was nothing else he could do, I suppose." He sat musing.

This disarmed Duncan. It was like the wrong conclusion to the clear logic Garner had followed. Duncan regarded his seeming innocence. Perhaps, then, it was real. Or else Garner was uncertain enough to feel the need of a ruse to cloud out the suspicion apparent in his questions. If this was it, then all his questions were bait. He had been watching, studying. He appeared to have recovered in the exchange all of his old composure. This was a moment when the inscrutable quiet that lay behind his eyes might overhear even the smothered rush of another's blood. Duncan could feel the pallor in his own face. As toward a peril he moved toward the question waiting at the end of this silence. But Garner took it out of his mouth:

"You've heard about him, haven't you?"

"Yes. Della told me. . . . Have they found out anything?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Don't they have any ideas?" His own steadiness gave him sudden assurance.

"Nothing definite."

He paused. "Aren't they even guessing? I mean, have they got a theory?"

"Yes, sort of. They think somebody killed him."

Duncan could not be sure any more. The change in Garner's eyes might have come naturally with such an utterance. At any rate he could not now leave off the question:

"Why do they think so?"

"What would you think?" Garner waited for a second. "He went out after supper on Monday night and didn't come back. You would think he'd have left some kind of excuse if he meant to stay away. There's no reason why he should have to slip off. He didn't even go in a car, even though he had one. So he must have walked. Anyway, none of his friends picked him up. Nobody at all drove up to the house." He asked again, as though Duncan's opinion might have value, "What would you think?"

In the face of Garner's directness he quailed a little and looked down. He said, "I guess I'd think that too"; thinking that it was obvious, all of it; that Garner would have to be blind not to see; that he himself had been stupid to think nobody would guess.

"It must have happened not too far away."

But when he raised his eyes Garner was not looking, he was getting up. He went to the fire and raised his face toward the portrait for a second. He turned with the appearance of having been unaware of it, and said, "Within a mile or two, probably."

With a dryness that reflected only what he felt inside him Duncan said, "You sound like a detective."

"I'm interested, of course. He was a member of my church . . . in name, anyway. His father has been a great help with things I've tried to do. And besides, it's a matter of justice. Too many things like this happen in our county."

It was the familiar note of pedantry. Duncan's anger responded. He overheard the belligerent tone in his own voice. "Have you got a suspect?"

"The sheriff has."

"Who?"

Garner gave him time to all but strain at the emptiness of his lungs.

"Do you know a man named Aaron McCool?"

It hit him with nearly the force of his own name. He thought of Aaron, waiting outside now, gazing into the lighted room. "Slightly," he said. "I met him once."

"Then you're one up on most people."

In spite of himself Duncan's voice was low. "Why him?"

Garner seemed to speak from a height, as from a pulpit, looking down with the calm of his authority. "He fits, doesn't he? Within walking distance. A man already suspicious. Lives all alone back up in the woods, like a wolf. Surly and unapproachable. Nobody knows where he came from, or why. He's almost certainly a moonshiner. Unfortunately, Jordan was a little wild, drank a good deal of whisky. It's not likely he went all the way to Nashville for it. The sheriff thinks it's a good bet. Don't you?"

"I guess so," Duncan managed. Then, with more strength, "But it doesn't prove anything." His belligerence was rising again. He thought of a wolf watching from out in the darkness.

"No, but it might lead somewhere. The sheriff has picked him up by now . . . if he found the still. He was taking a lot of men to look for it."

This time Duncan did not flinch. He took it straight in his face, like a blow on an angry cheek. Only it left him mute, reflecting that after all the tawny eyes were not watching. The thought of him in that jail was sudden pain.

"Anyway, it will be a good thing to arrest him," Garner went on from his height. "He may be wanted somewhere else; there are all the indications. Even if he's not, this ought to drive him out of the community."

"Like a wolf," Duncan said with bitterness.

"Like a wolf, then." Garner's eyes snapped the least bit. "I've seen his kind before. Nobody can help them. They resist everything out of a kind of impenetrable egotism. They're total misfits drifting from place to place causing trouble. Sometimes they can be a real menace. What else can society do but treat them like wolves?"

Duncan thought of a wolf pacing with yellow outraged eyes around the walls of a cell. He had to hesitate, to contain an anger that all but outran his fear, his caution.

"You think it was him, then? . . . if it was anybody."

"The sheriff thinks so. His opinion ought to be better than anybody else's."

The evasion, made obvious in this repetition, afflicted his anger now instead of his fear. He had a violent impulse to drive Garner out of it, out of his game, however brief and risky the triumph. But it was the calculated and impudent blink of Garner's eyes that released the impulse.

"You don't think that."

The flash showed through Garner's composure. "Don't think what?"

"That anybody's opinion is better than yours."

Garner looked at him with cold eyes.

"What is your opinion?"

"I didn't say I had one."

"You've got one." He sat on the edge of his chair. He was in a kind of rage to squeeze it out of that hateful impassivity. "Why is it always 'the sheriff thinks'?"

"What is it, then?"

The words gave Duncan pause enough to see that he had better let the thing lie in Garner's mind unuttered, half articulate, like a threat never forced upon the tongue. But still he pressed. "You're the one that knows. What is it?"

"You seem to know as well as I."

He could have flown at Garner's throat then. He had it on his lips to say "Somebody with a motive." He saw the intelligence of it brightening in Garner's eyes. Then a change, a start that drew even Duncan's stare abruptly toward the doorway.

He did not know how long she had been there. But there was something chiseled, something ancient and petrified in the severity with which she stood, with which her gaze fell not so much upon as through, like a transparency, the figure of her husband. By her intensity she might have been gazing not at his body but at a revelation of pure spirit. Duncan would scarcely have known her; a few years before in a moment of hostility he might have imagined her thus in the distant future. Without looking he knew that Garner had blenched. When she told them the food was ready her words might as well have passed between lips of stone.

She did not soften during the meal. There was a certain

finality in her expression. But what she turned toward him might have been the clear side of a blemished face. He made no more than a bad pretense of eating. No one tried to fill the silence; the few words spoken were drowned with scarcely a ripple. Afterward they left quickly. At the door she said:

"You're pale as a ghost. Go to bed."

Timidly Garner took her arm and went with her out into the dark.

Duncan started as soon as he saw them reach the ford.

He saw no light in the hollow. At the clearing he felt the desolation before his eye could define it. In the flare of a match the ruin leaped at him, a chaos of sundered barrels and the kettle overturned and the pot on its side gashed open with an ax. It seemed no different, no less abandoned and final than other ruins of stills scattered through these hollows. He tried to pick out, in the light of another match, just where Jordan had lain. But the keg was gone. The illusion came that all of it had happened somewhere else, in a place vividly dreamed of and vividly remembered.

He went blindly. It was a long time before he found Aaron's house. Again he saw no light, and he knew that he had expected none. The sense of desertion was overpowering; the place was like a hull at the verge of collapse upon its own vacuum. Once more he felt a dreamlike bewilderment. It lasted until, like a quivering in his own brain, something stirred in the shadows. It was the dog. It appeared like a phantom against the blackness of the open door. The solidest thing about it was its eyes, which caught a little starlight. It turned and vanished into the doorway when Duncan set foot on the step. When Duncan entered in the light of a match the dog was seated on its haunches near the stove, watching, half-attentive, as though for it there was nothing new either under the sun or in the dark or in the feeble glow of a fire.

The match went out. At length he lit the lamp on the table. A chewed cigar butt lay in a dirty plate. Besides this there was no sign of what had happened. The few things in the room were all in place. Except the shotgun. He noticed the empty corner with a slight hesitation of breath. With the lamp he went out onto the porch and peered down into the rubble. The box was there undisturbed. He went

back inside and sat down in the lamplight, in Aaron's place. The dog settled onto the floor. Its lids drooped shut. Duncan noticed the lean protrusion of bone and muscle under the hide. Now and again the lids opened briefly upon sightless reddish eyes. The dog might have been waiting. But if it was it waited with a patience that had long since worn out eagerness. Somehow his mind was empty of all but his contemplation of the dog. Then he was not thinking even about that. After a time that might have been long or short his mind took up again. He stood up and blew out the lamp.

This desolation seemed worse than his fear; the cloudless sunrise which he took on his face from the window made no difference in it. The fast of many days that he had broken only with random tasteless mouthfuls had left him with neither hunger nor thirst. The pang in his stomach, the lightness in his head accompanied him dully, like a noise to which one is used. His body was spent of meaningful sensation. In these hours of dead nerves he almost could have welcomed the livening sharpness of pain.

He paced about the house. He climbed the steps and stood in the dim upstairs hall. He entered each of the dusty rooms. In his own, his childhood room, he paused longest, then came downstairs again. He went into the parlor and stopped. All at once the place seemed hateful to him, stifling, as with air that has been breathed already. As if it were a cell which had long confined him, which now, by its strength, its finality, its imperturbable poise, threatened for the future. It was like something dead and stiffened in the gesture of hospitality. With one foot he shoved a chair out of its place. For the first time in his life he felt that with pleasure he could have watched it all go up in flames. He turned from the room and took his coat and went outdoors where a gusty wind was getting up. Clouds were sailing toward the sun.

He walked onto the footbridge and stood looking into the water. After a while he raised his head sharply. He had a sense of bristles rising on the back of his neck. It sounded again. It was a voice shouting a great way off. He did not hear it any more, though he stood for a long time straining. He crossed the bridge and followed the creek around and climbed to the top of the bluff. A squirrel chattered furi-

ously at him. He was panting, trying to hear above the tumult of his breath and of the squirrel. He crossed to the other side of the ridge, and listened again. Slowly, halting now and then, he followed the ridge back to where it forked out of a broader one. He heard a dog. It was a long way off. But it was no hound, not with that shrill voice. He crossed the hollow. He moved carefully, and the damp leaves made little noise.

He looked across at the point of the hill that split the big hollow into twin halves. It was up the left-hand branch they had carried him that night. Like a voice from out of a cave a shout resounded. The answer came abruptly, a volume of sound that made him drop to a crouch. Someone was coming down the hollow to his right. He turned, still crouching, and started back. He heard the voice, not even shouting any more. He huddled behind the trunk of a tree.

On the slope below him were staggered ranks of tree trunks bleached and gray and black. Then sunlight splashed on the slope. The bare trees gleamed with a pale and mottled cast of silver. He saw a flash of dull red in the hollow. He saw two figures in single file flickering on and off again, like a progress through scattered beams of light. When they came directly below Duncan one of them was speaking. When he finished no answer was audible. Duncan saw like a menace the image of that immobile and cadaverous face turned on the deputy at the fair. A voice, the same one as before, reached him with faint distinctness:

"Where's that damn fyce? The whole bunch has done run off."

Duncan strained to hear a response, to see the man. But he could do neither. A long shuddering whistle arose from the hollow. It was followed by a falsetto call that resembled the muffled blast of a hunting horn, and rebounded for several moments among the hills. The men came into view again. They paused at the fork of the hollows, paused long enough to draw Duncan's intensity to a pitch still higher. A dog barked faintly. It was like a prepared signal upon which they had been waiting, upon which they moved with decision out of the main hollow and up the left-hand fork. They were instantly hidden from sight.

He did not get up from behind the trunk. He waited, try-

ing to comfort himself with the thought that they were sticking to the hollows; that Aaron had been smart; that high up there in that thick laurel, four days buried, it was something more than unlikely that even the keenest dog would find him.

A shrill yelping broke out in the distance. Then he heard hounds' voices. At first it sounded as if they had struck upon a track, had taken it in full cry. But the fullness was shattered after a second. The voices, sprinkled with yelps of a fyce or two, converged in a wild snarling farrago of noise, like a running fight with a large and powerful quarry. It *was* some kind of a fight. And on the ridge where the laurel was. He stood up. He listened to the sound of it, moving across the plateau now. It came toward him for a moment; it raised furious echoes from all the hills. Then it hushed. A few straggling and threatful yaps sounded in its wake. Everything was still.

He was trying in a sweat of nerves to account for it. At a faint rustle of leaves behind him he jumped, and a rabbit fled. Moments later a voice took up. It was dim. Directly it grew loud, a wild repeated shout, like a cry of distress. And it was from high up, it was on the laurel ridge. A voice answered from lower down, and another from a long way off, and the bark of a dog. They raised a riot of echoes, like many spectral voices sounding off in uncadenced response from unexpected coverts. He steadied himself against the tree. The hush that had fallen seemed more deadly than the shouting. He waited through a hiatus which silenced even his heart. Once more he heard a shout, and the answer. He could make out a sound that was like the voices of men conversing across a space.

It was then he felt an intrusion. It was such a feeling as might come of a subtle change in the air, a change which yet has not focused upon any one particular sense. Quite suddenly it defined itself as an odor, a stench in his nostrils. He shuddered, thinking it was not possible, trying to drive it from his imagination. But it clung, faint yet sickening, the vile and sweetish stink of putrefaction. Even if they had unearthed it . . . even the strongest wind . . . With horror the fancy crossed his mind that his own body gave it off. Then he wheeled and saw the dog.

It sat barely panting a half-dozen steps away. It watched

him with those empty and bleared and imperturbable eyes. There were stains on its teeth and jaws; its feet were muddy. The orange and muscle-strutted hide bore the marks of its conflict. For Duncan not to have heard, the dog must have glided and settled there like a mist; or like the stench it carried upon its body and its breath. All at once he shrank back. But still it held his eye like a horror blossomed suddenly into flesh. He stared even as he moved off in a wide arc around the dog. And the dog's eyes, quite disinterested, gazed back at him from the slow-turning head.

Beyond the dog he walked faster. He saw that it had got up, was moving in his wake. He was all but running when he looked back again. The dog followed at about the same interval. In the hollow he snatched up a rock, and threw. The rock missed but the dog stopped. He climbed the slope, panting, in the fancy that even this exertion of wind did not clean the taint from his nostrils. At the top of the slope he glanced back. The dog with a look of graven immobility watched him from below. Duncan just contained an impulse to run. He hurried, with backward glances, with sporadic plunges against briars and vines that entangled him. Rounding the head of the next hollow he stopped. He saw nothing of the dog. But the smell, or its impression was with him. He felt a little sick. He saw the dog. It came on at an idle trot, almost in silence, nose to the ground, with a certain blind and unhurried and languorous assurance. Its approach seemed to bring a powerful increase of the stench. Duncan shuddered once convulsively. His movement without his will ended in a plunge, a flight. He ripped through bushes. He fell hard on his belly and got up and ran on. He did not look back again. He slid down the bluff, tumbling stones, grasping at vines and saplings. The sight of the footbridge sobered him. He felt a little foolish, like a child coming out of the dark. But this was instantaneous; the fear went on inside him. From the bridge he looked back. He waited for minutes, but he did not see the dog.

In the house he fell exhausted onto his bed. But instead of rest nausea came. The core of it lodged like a swelling, like a smooth stone far down in his gullet. He lay very still and breathed deep. Then he was smelling it again. It was as if the long breaths drew it from an unknown source in

through his nostrils. Once more he fancied that his own body gave it off. It was more than a fancy; it came upon him with all the force of certitude, with a deep inward shudder that pressed the nausea into his throat. He came upright, certain of it even now, assured that nothing, not all the water in the oceans, could wash his body clean. A face he would not have known stared at him from the mirror; a face as shrunken and damp and bloodless as that of one starved in the darkness of a cave. Behind this face he had tried to hide it—from his sister and Garner and Della and Logan. A wave of contempt displaced his horror. That too gave way before the acid nausea that surged into his mouth.

Because there was nothing in him the retching would not cease. It was like an immense travail to strain out a corruption lodged in the entrails themselves. The strain brought him at last to his knees, flickering darkness in front of his eyes. When it stopped he lay back spent against the side of the bed. All of it was over now. He thought of a place with many springs and forests, of great trees with spirits in them, of the beating ocean and a sky as unblemished and high as heaven. He thought of Aaron. Upon this image his mind closed tenderly.

In a fainting sleep he was still conscious of it, like a tiny invisible core of warmth. The unfolding of his mind revealed it to the light again. But now it appeared as something embedded in the crystalline clarity of an idea, a purpose. Just so it had come to him in sleep. Its vividness persisted. He did not examine it, did not look beyond it. He only felt a stirring at his heart. He glanced out into the gathering night. In a few hours it would be time to go. At the thought his eyes came back to the room, to the door and the gloomy hall. Suddenly, even in this twilight period, this unbreathing silence, the house did not oppress him any more. Instead what he felt was a certain nostalgia which grew after a moment into the sharpest pang. He took one deep breath for all the things it would never see again, for the long abundant life that now had passed clean away. He stood up. He was dizzy with the effort; he knew that he needed food. He went into the kitchen and forced himself to eat.

There were shuffling steps on the porch, and a knock.

Logan's silhouette through the pane gave another wrench to his heart. He let him into the gloomy kitchen. Because there was so little now to hide he lit the lamp and turned it up until the glow filled his own eyes. He faced Logan across a silence which by contrast seemed full of unuttered things. He was surprised at the old Negro's appearance; as if he had given way all at once to an old load of weariness which caused his shoulders to stoop and his eyes to glare uncertainly through a sleepless tint of pink. His face, always clean-shaven before, sprouted threadlike tips of whitish hair. For the first time he thought of Logan as a man not invulnerable to death. The more so when he heard a voice strangely enfeebled, like a hint of encroaching mortality.

"Has you got any better?"

"I'm all right," Duncan said. "What about you?"

Logan ignored or did not hear the question. He said, "This here's the last day of the year."

Duncan had not thought of it but he nodded and said, "Then you'll be leaving tomorrow."

Logan looked straight at him. "I done decided to stay on . . . if you want me to."

"I would, if I was going to be here. I'm leaving too. I thank you, though."

"I kind of thought maybe you was." He looked down at one of his gnarled hands, as though he gently held that intelligence in it. "You going back where you was before?"

"I don't know where I'm going."

Logan kept gazing at his hand. The lighted ebony ridge of his brow threw a shadow that made empty sockets of his eyes. "It's all done over, ain't it? Won't never be the same . . . no more."

Duncan let it fall in the stillness. He said, "You've been . . ." But there were so many things this old man had been, meant. Now he was like a disarmed and venerable actor whose talents are disdained by the age into which he has lived. Duncan left the sentence unfinished and said, "You can have that barn of tobacco."

The few things else that were utterable they said. It ended briefly, in a pause as charged and inarticulate as their hearts. Logan held out his hand; his eyes still drooped. The hand was hard with calluses. But the fragile grip seemed a mockery of so outward a deception.

Duncan picked up the lamp and walked to the door behind him and onto the porch. Logan halted on the steps. Duncan gazed expectantly at the back of the stooped and still-hatless figure. Logan stood like one caught up in an irresistible moment of contemplation.

"What old dog's that?" he murmured finally.

Like something forgotten the stench waked up in Duncan's nose; it came upon the breath he was already discharging when his eyes fastened on the dog. The creature was getting to its feet in the outer ring of light. The reddened eyes glared as through smoky lenses into the rays of the lamp. They blinked. With indolence the dog turned and became a shadow moving out into the dark. But it did not take the smell away. Duncan murmured something indistinct. He waited for Logan's revulsion, but it did not come. Instead Logan's voice was saying:

"I seen that old dog before. He was up there at the barn that morning . . . when your horse got killed. He was eating on a rat. He never run. Just got up lazy like, and walked off . . . like he done just then." Logan half turned, as if he expected something. When nothing came he said, "I got to studying about it later on. Figured I might ought to tell you. Then I figured they weren't no use of it."

Still there was no answer. He turned and faced obliquely Duncan's stare. What Duncan saw might have been only the lamp's reflection; but it impressed him as some secret and unhappy intelligence in Logan's eyes, eyes which paused upon his own through a moment of meditation before they shifted again. Whatever they meant their withdrawal left Duncan with a deadening certainty. In a single sweep of his memory he comprehended many things. At length he heard himself murmur, irrelevantly:

"Didn't you smell it?"

But Logan was turning away then. He might not have heard; the faint nod of his head might have been as likely as not imaginary. He uttered some gentle farewell word or two, to which Duncan heard himself respond mechanically. He watched Logan limp out of the circle of light and change into a shadow and vanish out of sight.

It did not matter that he knew . . . if he knew. But this reflection was like something spoken in a broad empty space where there were neither echoes nor ears to hear. He

stood there with the lamp in his hand, the immobile and upright axle in a broken wheel of light. He did not move until he saw a stirring in the dark. He turned and went into the house.

He did not question his conclusion. He remembered too well his moments of discomfort under the chilling and contemplative yellow gaze of Aaron. This was what had lain behind it, maturing like a work of art from an accidental germ that had fallen into Aaron's mind. Through those sleepless nights Aaron had pondered it with an insight that astonished. But perhaps it was not so astonishing. Aaron had only to recognize in Duncan an incipient likeness of himself. His own life was his model; his purpose was to create another in his moral image, a fellow in his loneliness. To achieve it was only a question of detail, to be worked out with study and thought, with calculations projected against his own experience. Once, the night of the whisky run, he had miscalculated, had overlooked something, and had gone awry. But out of the error, the quiet interval of revision, his inspiration had come. It was a simple matter in the gloaming light of dawn; it had not required even haste. Then he had only to wait for ripeness, again with his own experience by which to measure out the days. The final touch, the rendering of the thing, had scarcely even called for an effort of subtlety. And he had succeeded. He had got what he had set out after, what on his own he had created by his own special insight. Except he had overlooked a thing or two that he could not patch. Now, on his own, as much by himself as before, he could pay for his carelessness. This thought gave Duncan a brief satisfaction.

Again the silence of the house, like the one great fact, closed around him. He knew, with emphasis, the oppression of being close to things which never speak, which imply nothing. Their tonguelessness was an assault upon his nerves. He carried the lamp into the bedroom and sat down on his bed. There was a desperation in loneliness like this, a starving of nerve and sense. He understood how Aaron could do it, as hungry men do things which fly in the face of scruples. Aaron would have done it however great the risk. Except for a thing or two, except for that dog, he might have succeeded all the way. Then they would have

gone off together. Duncan envisioned it. But all that imagined brightness was gone. . . . Or if only Logan had not come tonight, had not seen the dog. In the grip of the impulse which had held him Duncan would have gone on with his purpose. With any luck he would have accomplished it too, in that little country jail. Then he never would have found out. He regretted that Logan had come; he thought of Aaron's gentleness. He saw the jug standing yet on the floor by his bed. How warm the neck of it had been when he took it from Aaron's hand. Through the whole night they had been that way; there was nothing feigned in that. Now he shivered with the cold.

He knew that he could not stay any longer, not by himself in this house. Not if they never found out. But they would . . . from Aaron, from out of the air. Perhaps they had already. He got to his feet. The surge of emotion brought with it a sense of release. He stood a moment flushed with the need for haste, with elation at that need. Out of the pause he had forced upon himself he moved straight to the closet. He changed his clothes, he stuffed others into a little handbag. He would need money, and he knew where he could get it. He blew out the lamp.

Even then he could not resist a pause at the door. It lasted only a few seconds. Though there was nothing to listen for he listened. The stillness gave one last pain to his heart. But the place could hardly be more silent after he was gone, who in the flesh had little more than haunted it. The rude snap of the latch seemed an irreverence. Gently he pulled the door shut behind him.

It was misting rain. The dog was there, a shadow. But he heard it, smelled it following after him. He walked fast. He entered the shed of the barn where the truck stood. Because the dog was behind him he resisted an impulse to pause once more before he got in and started the engine.

CHAPTER THREE

He stooped down at the edge of the gap in the shattered porch floor. By the light of a match which flared and instantly died he glimpsed the box in the rubble. He drew it out and slipped off the cord and took the sacks of money. Then he put the box back. He could go now. He stood up. Rain of the fineness of mist kept falling. He could just make out the black doorway in front of him. For the first time he considered clearly where he should go. But he could see no further than a turn onto the highway. Somehow all the places he envisioned looked little different from this, this ruin, this sounding desolation. For it did have a kind of sound, something beyond or beneath silence which an ear attuned like his could discern. It was something grimly familiar which he thought he had left behind. Because of it his mind went cloudy with thoughts about the future; because he sensed now that it would stay with him wherever he went.

The rain whispered about him. He stood holding the money . . . Aaron's money. They had meant to use it between them. Not that he had believed more than half in the vision they had conjured up that night. Nor had Aaron, who had been there already and come back. But that did not matter much; they had found communion enough to do

instead. All night long, it seemed, he had talked and listened and watched Aaron's shadow on the ceiling. In this desolation it came back with a force that staggered his purpose. He had to recall what Aaron had done, had calculated with a wisdom as cold as a snake's. Because of it Duncan was here in the shelter of a ruin only less complete than his own life. He noticed the sifting rain against his face. Yet this reflection did not revive his purpose. Instead the longer he nursed it the more it seemed a quibble. He waited doubtfully, as if the mere succession of moments, the steady fall of rain, might give it substance again. Finally he was gazing at a chimera, then at nothing at all.

The blankness lasted only a second. He felt that impulse rising afresh with hardly a pause for the formalities of argument, of justification. He thought of Aaron in the cell. What had he done, anyway, but hasten a thing that in some guise would have happened by itself, or by some other agency than his. In this silence, this water-dripping darkness the thing did not seem so great. He saw himself as a man half stricken at the outset, only waiting in ignorance for what was bound to fall. The cause long preceded Aaron. He had himself to blame for this.

But these thoughts came, as it were, intermitted with beats of his pulse. Directly they were smothered out. The impulse that Logan's words had stilled seemed the fresher for its hours of suspension. The thought of Aaron's glad face brought a kind of serene joy. He moved stumbling through the debris to the steps. He had reached the truck before he realized that he had no plan. In the pause one detail came clear: that it was not yet late enough. He climbed into the cab and sat waiting beneath the gentle susurrations of rain on the canvas top. He thought of Aaron. He thought of Garner . . . the one who likely enough had put the sheriff on Aaron's track. To drive him out . . . like a wolf. Now he would get rid of two instead of one.

There were details to think about. But strangely his mind seemed too full, almost serenely contemplative of the thing itself. There might have been nothing else to it but the opening of that iron door.

He did not doze, or even shut his eyes. But after a while he reached a state in which his pulse crept and his mind idled upon the thing. He was lulled by the sense that it was

before him like a destiny into whose events he must only launch himself. He heard no sound but the rain; an intuition roused him. He knew what it was the instant before it afflicted his nostrils. He started the engine and switched on the lights. The dog stood looking into the beams; its eyes glowed like twin spots of slow lurid fire. Duncan shoved the throttle and the truck lurched forward. But he never felt it hit the dog. He turned the truck around, but in the sweep of the headlights he did not see it again. He moved off onto the muddy tracks of the road; it was late enough now. Vaguely he reflected that even this beginning had not been at the instance of his will.

An old dirt pike came into town from the north side. Until it ran onto pavement a few hundred yards from the square there was nothing except a shanty or two, for the town was growing the other way. He crossed over to it from the main road and stopped the truck well short of the first houses. He left it turned, facing north. The houses had no lights. But at wide intervals along the pavement all the way up to the square, blobs of rainy luminous haze stood up under the hanging street lamps. He avoided these, though no one was around to see him. He reflected, distantly, that it was already the new year.

He turned off short of the square and passed in back of the buildings. Because of the hounds he could not approach the jail from behind. He turned off again between two buildings and stood facing the square one door down from the jail. The square was empty, but there was light enough to give him uneasiness. It struck him with force that he had not the roughest plan. Then, the strangeness of it all began to tell on him. Moments later, gazing out upon a view so anciently, tediously familiar, he was almost unmanned by a sense of the ludicrousness of his purpose. The reasons which he called up seemed like fictions, or like dreams which had led him in his sleep to this place.

He heard a noise. Instinctively he drew back a little. Someone was coming out of the jail. The man stopped on the sidewalk and stood as if caught up in a moment of suspicion. Before Duncan slipped back further into the dark he recognized the tall figure of the sheriff. The silence that followed upon his retreat had for him the quality of intensifying menace. At last he was holding his breath. Then he

heard a car door open, and shut. A shaft of light cut across the pale aperture. The noise of the engine echoed in the square. The car slid into view, burying at one stroke its shaft of light in the darkness.

He stepped forward and watched it circle the square, smooth and swift, lancing the night, and vanish at the southeast corner. He thought of the awkward truck. The courthouse clock struck once, reverberant, with its iron echo. It might have meant one o'clock or the half hour, he could not tell. He knew that he must hurry.

It was good luck that the sheriff had left at just this time. Again he had the sense of being caught up in events already shaped. He looked once more around the square. He kept close to the face of the building and moved across into the narrow yard of the jail. A rectangle of light misty with rain fell on the ground from the unshaded office window. Mud creaked softly under his feet as he moved over into the darkness beneath the wall. He could not hear a sound inside. He tried to think of some course of action. There were four cells in the jail, and he did not know which one held Aaron. If he remembered rightly only one of these could be reached from the ground. Anyway he could not risk the chance of rousing some unexpected prisoner. He stood with one hand against the wet wall. The need for haste gave a violence to his bafflement. How easy it would have been with a gun, with just that much forethought. He had to act some way, quickly. He heard a noise. It was faint; it was not repeated. Then he heard a whisper so quiet it was like a thought. It had to have come from the window behind and above him. He moved beneath and answered in just such a whisper. The words that issued from the black square over his head were blurred in the hissing rain. He whispered up at the window again.

"Which one's in there?" Aaron said.

"The sheriff's gone."

A moment of rain fell in the pause.

"You go to the front and watch. I'll get him back here. Then you come in."

Duncan hesitated. The hounds behind the jail began to growl. Aaron repeated it, and added, "He won't likely have no gun with him."

With a stiffness in his throat Duncan said, "I'm going now."

He turned. A sudden noise filled the square, a rumble. He pressed against the wall. It was only a truck, which abrupted onto the square and crossed it shatteringly. He reached the corner. Beyond it was a lighted window; the ledge was on a level with his eye. He put one hand on the ledge and stood on his toes. It was the same fat deputy. The sight of that jowled and florid face steadied him with a faint renewal of his former rage. Now the face was screwed up in a look of attention less than half belligerent which suggested the reality behind that untiring pretense. But the big shoes still rested on the desk. Duncan heard his voice, saw him speak into the air with a kind of vacant rolling of his eyes. The face arrested itself in an unconvincing grimace, and held it. Then came an unmistakable curse. With deliberation the feet came off the desk. The deputy went to a cabinet and dragged a rumpled blanket out of the bottom. He appeared uncertain as he switched on the light in the corridor. He dropped the blanket. He took a belt with holster and pistol from where it hung on the wall and buckled it around his waist. Duncan felt the plan suddenly spoiled. He glanced around the office for some weapon, but he saw none. Except a night stick on a table. But he could not hesitate, this seemed the last moment. The deputy stood straighter with the pistol on. He reached down and seized an edge of the blanket and dragged it behind him into the corridor.

Duncan stepped to the door. It opened easily but with noise. He heard voices. He eased the door shut behind him. He paused just for an instant. The table was in view from the corridor; he had only his hands to use. He crossed the office and flattened himself against the wall by the door. He heard the voices and his own rushing pulse. His muscles seemed tight to the point of binding.

A grunt issued from the corridor. Before he could look the noise of the scuffle had ended in an iron-sounding blow. He saw the deputy leaning hard, in a kind of convulsive fit against the bars. Aaron's encircling arm held his head wedged in one of the spaces. His other hand held the deputy's right arm. But the left arm was groping for the pistol. Duncan lunged.

"Get it," Aaron hissed.

Duncan snatched the pistol from the hand that was already drawing it from the holster.

"You like to not made it," Aaron said. "Get them keys." He had not turned loose the deputy's head.

Duncan ran into the office and wheeled. The keys hung by the door and he snatched them and ran back into the corridor. The deputy was on the floor, leaning, weaving like a drunken bear on one stiff arm and an elbow. Duncan heard a chuckling. In the cell opposite Aaron he saw between the bars a face suggesting a child's but withered and venomously ugly. He remembered it from somewhere. He heard the man say, with a voice incongruously shrill, "That were a good lick. But they'll hang you for it." Duncan stabbed the lock with one of the keys. It would not turn.

"Try that one," Aaron said. His hand was through the bars. He took the pistol from Duncan.

"I know you, Welsh." The voice chuckled.

Duncan remembered him. He had seen him countless times, from his boyhood up; a stunted little creature with a mind to match his face, the mind of an obscene and vicious child. He was usually drunk or drinking; he plagued by turns the square and the jail. Duncan thought of his own youthful revulsion. Then he found the key. Aaron shoved the door open.

"I knowed your pappy," the little man shrilled. "I always said you all was good timber."

Duncan glanced at him, his chuckling mouth, his teeth like so many shattered yellow fangs. "Let's go," he said.

"Got to fix Lard Ass," Aaron said.

The deputy flinched. He was sitting upright, staring slack-jawed at Aaron. Blood from his nose streamed around and into the dark gap of his mouth.

"Leave him alone . . . lock him in the cell," Duncan said with urgency.

Aaron stood over the deputy, holding the pistol. The deputy's face looked up at it with an expression of mute and confounded idiocy. "And let him holla out the window."

"Then gag him."

"I'll gag the son of a bitch."

It happened too quick for Duncan's outcry. The pistol fell in a vicious streak of silver, cracked against the dep-

uty's skull. He collapsed face down between his upraised elbows. His body gave a single twitch. The little man's voice was exultant.

"You didn't have to," Duncan breathed.

"This ain't no play party."

The little man said, "That were sure first rate. But they'll hang you for it."

"Shut your god-damn mouth," Aaron said. He had seized the deputy's hand. He lunged through the cell door, dragging his burden, and with one-armed power slung it past him to the middle of the cell. The deputy rolled onto his back and lay still. Aaron clanged the door shut and locked it and snatched out the keys. "Let's get," he said.

"You better look out for that sheriff," the little man piped, "he's a bad fellow."

The chuckling followed them into the office, to the outside door. They hit the sidewalk running. They cut into the first alley and came out splashing through puddles behind the row of buildings. Aaron reached the street first.

"To the right," Duncan hissed, "I got the truck."

Aaron pulled up short and faced him like a panting shadow. "They'd catch us in it 'fore we got twenty mile. We can steal a boat on the river. They won't know where we come out at." He was turning away.

"But the money's in the truck."

"Get it, then."

They went at a quiet trot down the edge of the street, skirting the lighted places under the lamps. The rain had slackened to the faintest drizzle. He saw his breath as he passed by the last of the street lamps. Now there was only darkness ahead. He could hear Aaron's steps out of time with his own. They reached the truck. He snatched the sacks of money from under the seat. Aaron stood looking another way. He still had the pistol in his hand. He kept the pause for a moment longer.

"Come on," he said.

They climbed the fence into a cornfield. They hurried, slogging through mud, shattering stalks in their path. The mud, like wet mortar, tried his heart and his lungs. At times he lost sight of Aaron and had to force an agonizing burst of speed. They climbed another fence and crashed through a thicket. They passed in back of houses, one with a light,

and a fyce yapped furiously. They reached the sawmill and the highway embankment that led up onto the bridge. The boat dock was down the road that led off the opposite side of the embankment. He saw Aaron rise above him against the dull sky, like someone sprung out of the earth. He struggled toward him up the slick bank.

They approached the boat dock at a slackening pace. The keeper's house showed no sign of life, but they circled it wide and moved along the edge of the river. Close to their feet the water looked black; further out pale ripples of light glanced on the surface. The rain had stopped. He glimpsed one cold star on the western horizon. He saw the boats.

The chains were wrapped tight and padlocked around heavy iron stakes. The tops of the stakes were flattened like the heads of nails, and they could not slip the chains off. They worked one of them loose in the ground and straining together pulled it slowly out.

"Find some paddles," Aaron whispered.

There was something, a hut, at the top of the bank. He climbed up to it. He felt with a rush of alarm the padlock on the door. Below him a chain rattled faintly, then there was silence. Hurrying, he moved around the hut. His hand touched something and seized it. It was a paddle. He felt another under his foot. But when he came up with it he stiffened. He knew the sound instantly; it came upon him like a familiar and curious chill. He plunged down the slope, dragging the paddles.

"The hounds!"

Aaron snapped the immobility of his stance. "This one," he hissed and leaped into the boat. Duncan stepped knee-deep in water and clambered with the paddles into the bow. His momentum had thrust the boat out from the bank. Aaron had one of the paddles; he was on his knees digging the water with it. Duncan knelt in the bow. The paddle bent in his hands.

"Head for the other side," Aaron muttered.

They struck the current. They moved at a downstream angle toward the invisible bank. Their paddles raised what seemed an uproar in the quiet river. Suddenly, like a sound upon which a door has been opened, the hounds topped the highway embankment. Their voices at full cry carried

like deep trumpet notes over the water. Glancing back Duncan saw a light in the boatkeeper's house. Every heave with the paddle had the weight of all his strength.

"That god-damn sheriff," he heard Aaron snarl.

The bank hove faintly out of the dark. Aaron straightened the boat downstream and they gathered speed. He saw the dark span of the bridge against the sky. A car flashed off the highway embankment. It stopped at the boat dock, and there were voices. A white beam of light played over the boats and the baffled dogs. Then it lanced out over the river, and swept slowly toward them. On the face of the water it cast a sliding mud-yellow pathway. They hunched down, but the beam fell short and passed on harmlessly. They went under the bridge. The voices were growing dimmer. They heard the roar of the car's engine, saw the headlights sweep the river, complete a turn, and lunge off back toward the highway.

"Faster!" Aaron cursed the sheriff with a deep half-articulate blasphemy.

They were below the bridge, angling still closer to the bank. A twig brushed his chest. Suddenly they heard the engine, then the shrill screech of tires. The boat shifted, it plowed into a tangle of low-hanging limbs. He ducked under his arms. The boat struck mud with a force that threw him against the bow. He stayed there. He could just see Aaron, hunched down, a blot among the woven blackness of the branches. Aaron must have been holding one of the branches, for the boat hung nearly motionless in the faintly gurgling current. The beam of light cut patterns on the river. It shifted from bank to bank. Then, starting above them, it began to work down the bank toward where they were. Its progress was tedious. The lacing of branches scored the water and the mud bank where the beam struck. It came on, in crawling shuddering dapples of light.

"Don't look at it," Aaron breathed.

It was upon them, a spray of brightness, on his trousers, on the gunnels of the boat. Almost he could feel its unsubstantial touch. It passed on.

"Keep down."

The beam came back, and hung for a second. Then it moved on down the bank. They waited. At length the beam crossed to the other bank. It worked back up to the

bridge, then went out. The car started and slid off the bridge out of sight.

"Let's go," Duncan whispered.

The boat slipped backward into the open. They righted it. In a few strokes they had their speed again. Soon now, beyond the range of any light, they could angle out into faster water. After a minute he knew they were far enough. But Aaron did not turn the boat. For another minute Duncan paddled in silence, feeling the strain in his muscles, his heart. He was about to suggest it. Then he heard, in the instant preceding Aaron's vicious curse, the sound of a motor starting. This time it was no car.

"Got him a motorboat," Aaron snarled.

It lent fury to their paddling. They kept it up for many moments; until Duncan felt his stroke going weak and sloppy, and a sudden consciousness of futility. He took his paddle out of the water. Over the thumping of his heart he heard the motorboat. He looked and saw its lights.

"We better get on the land."

"They got them hounds."

"It's a better risk than on the water."

For the briefest instant they drifted. Suddenly Aaron turned the boat in through a gap in the overhanging branches. Duncan reached out over the bow. He touched the root of a tree, and grabbed it. The stern of the boat swung around against the bank.

"Wait a minute," Aaron said.

Duncan could hear the motorboat, closer now.

"Right yonder's a creek. Turn loose."

The boat slid backward with a heave of Aaron's paddle. It was a narrow branch, or ditch, only a few widths broader than the boat. But it was deep at the mouth. They maneuvered the boat around and moved into the branch. They could feel no current yet; the water was like a still tongue of the river. Then Duncan's paddle touched bottom. He could feel the first pressure of a current. An instant later they grounded.

"We got to get farther . . . they liable to see up in here," Aaron said.

Duncan started to get into the water. Abruptly he huddled down. It was too late; the boat was coming on, was nearly even with the mouth of the branch. But it was at

mid-river, going fast. They kept still. A light flashed over them, and vanished. The motor did not falter. They listened to it going on down the river. Excepting that, faded now to a shrill whine, there was no sound but the rippling of water against the bow of the boat.

"They figure to go way down and work back up," Aaron said. "To be sure and head us off. They figure if we take to the land they can catch us with them hounds."

They were still for a little while. Aaron's voice startled him. It burst as if from between his teeth with a quality almost shrill, bestial, that paled even the revolting obscenities it cast upon the head of the sheriff; it suggested the snarl of a catamount enraged, intruded upon in the sanctity of his den. Duncan fancied that his eyes glowed in the dark. He envisioned his face at just such another moment, in a spasm of uncontrol over the fire that night at the still. Aaron's voice left the silence charged with his hatred. It seemed, like an acid, to consume everything but itself; even the urgent need for haste. When Duncan did speak he did not know whether Aaron would hear him.

"Maybe we better make a run for it. We can stay in this branch as far as it goes. . . . We can sink the boat."

But Aaron heard him. His voice answered in a level tone that only hinted at his passion. "The best chance is on that river. . . . Look here. We'll drag this boat on up a ways, and wait till they work back past this branch. Then we can hightail it. They'll figure we done took to the land." He stood up. He looked enormous standing framed in the portal behind him that opened onto the river. He added, "If it ain't come daylight by then."

They stepped ankle deep into the icy water, and took the chain. The boat slid smoothly for a moment, then scraped on rock bottom. They stepped into a pool to their hips. After that the water was so shallow that it lifted the boat only for instants at a time. They rounded a little bend.

"This'll do," Aaron said.

They sat in the boat. They did not talk. The bitter cold crept into his blood from his wet feet and legs. He shuddered. Then he was all absorbed in being cold; so much that gradually the fear, the tension was all but obscured by it. But with the encroaching numbness of his body his mind worked free. He thought of his house, his fire. It did not

comfort, even with the merest instant of illusion. The vision seemed equally cold with this. It was like a kind of balance between things that have no substance. He shuddered again. He could just make out Aaron's form in the darkness. If Aaron suffered from the cold he did not betray it by any perceptible movement of his body. Duncan watched him with an increase of intensity that after a moment reached the point of strain. Still he caught no suggestion of movement. There was a kind of inhuman stillness about him; an immobility that seemed to remove him as far beyond communion as death itself. Tentatively Duncan murmured:

"Where will we go when we get out of here?"

Aaron's answer, when it came, was like something extricated by force, in a voice that turned the harmless words bitter in his mouth.

"We better think about that when we get to it."

It was not the voice that startled Duncan; it was the impression that he had seen, as in a dull flash of light, Aaron's contorted face. He looked away. He began to imagine that here, just this little distance up the branch, the air had a colder danker quality. He could see nothing around him. Overhead the stars had come out. They looked too bleak to make any promise about the morning. He remembered what he had felt, his anticipation of that moment when he should let Aaron out of the cell. Beside the actuality, how childish that seemed now; like a little boy's dream of love. He thought of the blow; the deputy lying face down bleeding onto the concrete; the little man's exulting chuckle. Now he sat like one listening for the wind, waiting upon it for which way it would blow him next. In the distance he heard the strangled squall of a bobcat.

The cold made him get to his feet. He saw a light reflected in the trees down the branch near the river. He whispered to Aaron. This time Aaron heard him at once. They stood watching it. They heard the hollow thud of a paddle against a boat, then a voice. It was moving *down* the river; it was another boat. A beam of light shot up the branch. From around the bend they watched it play upon the bank, the glinting water. It vanished. They watched the glow among the trees; until with smothered thuds of paddles it moved on down the river.

Aaron looked up at the sky. "Going to be too late," he said. "We got to run or hide, one."

He listened in silence to what Aaron told him. They would have to sink the boat; or else their tracks would be easy to find. He stepped into water that felt little colder than his feet. They dragged the boat back to the deep pool they had waded through. They found some heavy rocks in the branch and put them in the boat and sank it, wedged it under a tangle of tree roots that coiled down into the water. Once Aaron cautioned him not to step onto the bank. Besides this not a word was said.

They moved back up the branch, sloshing the water. Aaron's pace was quick but not like a flight. Duncan followed him as he might have followed a guide. His mind did not work ahead any longer; he had ceased to feel with vividness their emergency. They passed the spot where they had sat waiting. A bluff hove up out of the left bank of the branch. Glancing up he saw that the sky overhead was lightening. They went on for a little space. The bluff fell back all at once; there was a sound of falling water. The branch turned, and they were at the foot of a ravine that mounted between two steep hillsides. They climbed slick stairsteps of rock over which small cascades of water tumbled. A little way up Aaron stopped.

"Right here's the end of it." He looked up at the sky. "Be light pretty quick." He stood as if digesting the fact. Duncan's teeth felt unnaturally set, in the grip of muscles hardened like cement. He heard the cat again.

"We'll do a heap better to hide some place. Get out to running them hounds is bound to cross the track." He scarcely seemed in a hurry. Neither was he waiting upon an answer. In the melting darkness Duncan saw him gaze studiously around him at both hillsides. He descended, brushed past Duncan, and stopped again on the next ledge down.

"Come on," he said. "Stay on the rock."

Duncan followed him out of the water. The ledge continued for several yards, like a narrow walkway along the hillside. At the end he stepped on shale and slipped and caught himself on a bush. He leaned to the slope, walking with his hands, digging for purchase with his feet. The footing leveled out. He reached a cluster of scrub pines

that grew out of a flat in the steep slope. Aaron stood in the thicket. The crown of his head topped the little trees. A few steps beyond him the hillside steepened into bluff, and rose sheer from the end of the flat. Duncan smelled the keen spoor of varments.

"This here's good as we'll find," Aaron said. "Them hounds won't likely scent us out up here."

In spite of the cold Duncan sat down. He rested his back against one of the little pines and drew his knees up close to his body.

Aaron said, "We don't need nothing now but a little luck. Come night we can get on that river again."

It was not yet light enough to see Aaron's expression; the tone told him nothing. Vaguely he imagined the event. It seemed to him just as imminent, just as substantial, as those pale images of the future which his mind briefly resurrected. He began to shiver again. He closed his eyes. A hollow ringing began in his ears; it seemed to remove him a great way off, from Aaron, from everything. He could fancy that it came not from within his skull but from without, from out of the empty space that now he inhabited alone. He opened his eyes. He saw the source of the varment smell: a horizontal slit in the foot of the bluff under a ledge of rock. It was high enough for a man to get into on his belly. Into this they would crawl if the men came close enough.

"Listen at that. Getting a early start."

It was a while before Duncan heard it, the short and hollow and intermittent bay of hounds hunting. They were still a long way off. They were coming up the river. The sheriff had brought them in a boat, had landed them at the farthest point down that he reckoned his quarry could have reached on the water. Spells of quiet followed each burst of the hounds' voices. Each time they sounded again they were less dim than before. The features of the earth were defining themselves: the scrubby trunks of the pines around him, the colorless needles, the craggy face of the bluff. Overhead the sky was as light as a cloudy noon. He looked down in time to see Aaron's profile break about the chin with a sudden constricted utterance:

"I ought to killed that son of a bitch." With no more than a parting, a writhing of his lips, he breathed, "I ought to

waited right there till he come back. I ought to of slit his throat."

Duncan stared at his face.

"He's got it to pay for yet. . . . Sure as I'm a man I'm coming back for him."

Duncan looked at his own clenched hands. "From South America?"

The irony that had got into his voice was lost on Aaron. "Can't no man treat me the way he done."

After a moment Duncan said, "The money's gone anyway. We left it at the dock."

"It ain't no trouble to get money." A brief jerk of Aaron's hand, a glance of silver, exposed the pistol he was holding between his knees. "We can get money mighty easy."

Duncan turned his head away and looked out into the hollow beyond the branch. Dawn had brought to all its details a gray distinctness. Suddenly he realized where he was. He saw the grove of dead and half-living timber, each trunk arrested, as it were, in mid-gasp, in a choke of roots that struggled like so many serpents for entrance into the stone-cropping earth. Farther up, in the point of the hollow, where the lichened piles of rock under which the Indians were buried. He remembered his night rides here, the chill he had felt always when he rode down into these flats. He had another wave of shudders. The ringing in the ears seemed to increase. Then, the cat squalled from somewhere close. Perhaps because this was his den, and he was trapped outside in the hateful light of day.

"They're coming," Aaron whispered.

Their nearness startled Duncan. He crawled to the foot of the bluff and feet-first slid his body under the ledge. Aaron moved under beside him, lay propped on his elbows. His hair touched the dripping rock. His finger worked softly along the trigger guard of the pistol.

Far out in the scattered grove of timber one hound appeared, then the other. They came on toward the bluff at a steady zigzag trot. In the dusky light they looked severely black. They moved without waste of motion, with a certain unnatural and flawless gravity. Closer, they looked enormous, too big for dogs. Then they passed under Duncan's line of vision. After a moment he heard them panting.

He held his breath. One of the hounds bayed briefly. But when they came into sight again they had passed the ravine, they were moving on up the hollow along the foot of the slope.

They did not move from under the ledge. Aaron kept as still as ever. His gaze was fixed now in the direction from which the hounds had come. It was daylight everywhere; the sun would rise clear. Duncan took no comfort in the thought. The dampness of the rock chilled his very image of the sun. The flat below him with its trunks and stones seemed only to grow more desolate with the increase of light. All at once he was thinking of his sister. Her face, her voice, were as distinct to him as a presence. He wondered at the difference in her, the overriding impression of a gentleness that had not been there in the past. This was no illusion. It was as though she had come upon some obscure yet simple wisdom; something he might have had for the asking. Perhaps she had been wanting to tell him, had been waiting only for him to ask. Now he had no choice but to keep his long habit of stillness.

Aaron's body jerked. He lay as though stiffened in the aftermath of a shock. Duncan took one look at his face, and glanced out into the timber. He knew at once, even at that distance, the identity of the man walking toward them from the direction the hounds had come. There was nobody with him. He came on at an easy walk that gave his hat, his dull red shirt an appearance of gliding through the crooked timber. He showed no sign of tension; he might have been attending to some ordinary business. Gradually Duncan began to feel in the sheriff's manner, in the fact of his being alone, a certain open contempt for his quarry. Conscious or not, it was more than half a challenge. He imagined an inarticulate sound emerged from Aaron's throat.

Duncan whispered, "The others are probably in calling distance."

Still a good way off the sheriff stopped. He seemed to be scanning the length of the bluff and the slope. Once he turned around and stood for a space looking the other way. When he looked back he appeared to be gazing straight at their hiding place. He moved toward them again. Duncan drew back a little from the light, but Aaron did not. He lay

in a rigid, almost predatory calm. The sheriff veered off to their right and vanished beyond the projection of the bluff. Aaron stirred. Before Duncan could see what he intended he had slipped from under the ledge.

"Get back, he'll see you."

Aaron only squatted against the ledge on the run-down heels of his brogans.

"Come back under." Duncan no more than dimly grasped the cause of his own swelling agitation. "Wait till he gets clear away."

Suddenly Aaron ducked so low that his face was visible from beneath the ledge. Duncan heard footsteps on the rocks below. The sheriff was moving past them up the branch. He watched Aaron's face in profile, the taut and just perceptible retraction of his lips. Then he saw what was going to happen. He reached for Aaron's leg. It was snatched out of his grasp, and Aaron with the noiseless speed of a cat springing had reached the outer edge of the flat. His voice was not loud but it cut; it might have been heard a good distance off, like a harsh whisper in a cave. No sound came from below. Aaron did not raise up from his crouch. The arm holding the pistol rested without a quiver on his knee.

"Climb up here," he said in a voice above a murmur.

Duncan crawled from under the ledge and raised up to a stooping position. All at once he was dizzy. The figure of Aaron crouched with his pistol in the white light of dawn seemed to writhe faintly. He felt like one who doubts whether his own nightmare is real. For a second he doubted the existence of someone he could not see standing under the point of that barrel.

But Aaron's voice snapped, with an unexpected break on the final word, "You better do it quick." He was not, in fact, still any longer. A tautness made his body tremble as with a half-governed fit. There was a moment, before the sheriff's steps splashed in the water, when Duncan thought the bunched and pulsating body might actually spring from the edge. It was like a vision of some primordial rage, some blood-hunger long supposed to exist no more in the human heart. He wished to avert his eyes, but he could not; it had for him the sickened fascination of an ulcerous infection in one's own flesh. Suddenly his thoughts of the

future came back like so many dreams of ugly desires fulfilled.

He heard the scuffling movements below the edge. A hand appeared, then the head of the sheriff. It hove above the edge like a startling reality into a place of phantoms. Yet strangely it steadied Duncan. The face showed strain but it might have been from climbing. Whatever the sheriff's passion it lay deep behind a control seemingly more than muscular. This, in spite of his cadaver-like face, hinted even now at a certain independence, a certain triumph; he might have been the catcher instead of the caught. His greenish glance, as he climbed over the edge, fell first on Duncan. It seemed to imply no comment. This trivial thing was enough to raise in Duncan a vague impulse of gratitude.

"Stay down low," Aaron said as with a swollen tongue. Only then did the sheriff look squarely, deliberately at him. If anything the spastic movements of Aaron's body, the tic at the corners of his lips, had grown more violent. In a glance that brought a momentary emptying of his eyes the sheriff read the final meaning of it. He did not flinch. Rather he seemed by his insolent calm to be bent upon provoking the thing to its issue. Duncan had stiffened. Without any clear purpose he gathered his legs beneath him.

"You slipped up this time," Aaron said. "But it just as well been now. I'd of come back for you anyhow." Even in his passion he desired a different kind of moment from this, which fairly mocked his triumph. He was making an effort to steady himself.

With the same provoking calm the sheriff said, "Look to me like you're the one slipped up. 'Cept for this you might of had luck. This here was a good place."

"I don't need no luck. I'd rather have you." But his voice had not matched the sheriff's. It was this consciousness alone which still restrained him. His lips were curling when with impudence the sheriff looked away from him, looked at Duncan.

"You was the one done it to Jordan, wasn't you?"

The question caught Duncan off balance. Yet it was by his own will that he affirmed it with a nod and a whispered "Yes." The utterance raised an instant gladness in him, a feeling like that of an unpromising door swung back upon a

clean bright place. He looked straight at the sheriff. "It was me. I killed him with that shotgun. He was sitting—"

"Shut up!" Aaron was on his feet leaning almost beyond balance toward the sheriff. "Get under that ledge." The last of his control was gone. The pistol quivered within a foot of the sheriff's face. But whether it was a refusal, or only the second of inertia that comes upon a startling command, the sheriff had not moved. Even now he had waited too long.

"Leave him alone!" Duncan had lunged to his feet. It might have punctuated Aaron's move, for in that instant the sheriff grabbed for the pistol. He was not quick enough. The pistol rose and fell like a bright projectile. It cracked on the sheriff's skull with a force that sprawled him side-wise on the ground.

Duncan jumped between them. As much by surprise as by the weight of his body he checked Aaron's lunge toward the prostrate sheriff. As one man they tripped and staggered through the bushes. They struck the bluff. Duncan held him there. He managed to grasp the arm that had the pistol. A hand closed on his neck. "We've done enough, we've done enough." Duncan could just strangle out the words. He had the sense that Aaron understood him no better than an animal could; his reply was a kind of spitting. Duncan felt his advantage pass. The surge of Aaron's strength, as if inspired by a single guttural curse, was like a violent swelling of the body his right arm encircled. He felt his left arm give way at the elbow, as sticks break. The pistol barrel jammed into his ribs. He scarcely heard the shot. He felt a sensation like the stab of a red-hot tine which seemed to unhinge him at the belly, at the knees. Two successive blows, one to his spine, one to the back of his head, were delivered him by the uprushing earth.

He looked through a thin lacing of needles up into a rose-tinted sky. He could not feel much; the one sensation of his body was a dull throbbing cramp in his chest. He lay in unclear expectation of some sound of violence, but he could not hear anything at all. After a little he felt himself perfectly alone.

"Duncan."

It might have been some timid and innocent voice in a moment of awe or fright. Aaron's head intruded between

him and the sky. His face looked blurred, without color, as if it hung too near to be viewed clearly. Even the hot yellow eyes seemed burned out in their sockets.

"I never aimed to," he said. "It was just . . . I never aimed to."

Duncan felt a hand barely touch his chest. The voice saying "Then we'll fix it, we'll fix it up" sounded strangely fatuous. He heard a sound of ripping cloth. He felt his garments stripped back from his chest, and then a pressure that hurt him. An arm slid under his shoulders, and lifted. The groan that started up out of his throat failed him as abruptly as the light.

He felt a dawning pain that after a moment vibrated in every nerve of his body. He realized that this vibration came from under him. He lay propped in the boat, dragged backward over the rock bed of the branch. Suddenly a dark taste in his mouth was strangling him. A fit of coughing brought pain that dimmed his vision again. But it cleared his windpipe. Then the vibrating stopped, the boat was floating. There was a splashing of water. Aaron moved past and faced him over the stern of the boat. His shirt was in ribbons. For a second he looked at Duncan, then averted his eyes. His lips moved, but Duncan heard no voice. Even now when his senses were retreating more and more from all outward things the difference in Aaron's face did not escape him. Just this way it might have appeared through a window clouded over with a visible film of dust.

Aaron bent over the stern of the boat and shoved. It was then, as out of surrounding darkness, that a voice came in warning. The boat seemed to leap on the water. A shot rang out but the boat slid on. Now Aaron's head was lower down, shifting with his effort. Behind Aaron Duncan glimpsed the sheriff. He stood still in shallow water and aimed the pistol. It fired three times quick. The boat dragged to a halt. Aaron hung upon the stern. Now his eyes looked bright again, intently fixed on Duncan. The pause lasted an instant. Into it broke the cry of the hounds. Aaron's face stiffened, and the boat lurched once more. Then came two shots. Blood spouted from his neck. Slowly his head sank down out of sight, but his hands like claws still gripped the stern of the boat. Again his face appeared. It was washed over with blood, and out of it his eyes stared

at Duncan with all the despair of an everlasting and intolerable hunger. He made one blood-spilling effort to climb into the boat, then gave it up. He seemed to sway in a last second of balance. But he did not fall. Instead, somehow, he came nearly upright, so that his shoulders and chest were out of the water. Faltering, both hands clutched on the stern of the boat, he appeared to set himself. His bright failing stare was fixed on Duncan. He fell forward with an explosion of breath and a shove incredibly powerful that sent the boat straight out in front of him. Then he was not there any more. Where he had been was a swirl, and a troubled stain on the face of the water. Toward this the bodiless heads of the hounds were swimming silently.

The boat was in the river, in the sun. He felt the current seize it; he felt the boat swing slowly around. He was drifting out into the river. He seemed to gain speed. By degrees this consciousness of drifting smothered everything else. Then he could feel nothing, not even his pain. Nor could he hear anything. At last he found himself unable to remember so much as what had preceded this. He knew only that he had drifted into a world where there was a terrifying absence of all things that the mind and the senses can know. Except that there was light, and he could see. He might, in fact, have been nothing else than an eye without a body, without even a lid to close against the insufferable brightness of the sun. More and more he became conscious of the light. It became a kind of agony he had never experienced before. He longed to shut it out, to close or avert his eye. But there was no way. Until of itself his vision clouded as with an uprush of tears. The light became almost bearable. As his eye clouded more he could look at it without pain. At last, when he saw that the light would vanish completely, he had reached the point of regretting that he had to be left in the oncoming dark.

*Welsh was
stripped of everything—
his woman, his child,
his manhood*

Duncan Welsh thought he was tough. He ran the finest stud farm in all of Tennessee, and there wasn't a man or horse in six counties Welsh couldn't whip.

Until he met Jordan.

Jordan was even tougher. For openers he simply took Welsh's wife. Then he took his child. Then his prize stallion. Then his right eye. When he finished, Welsh was stripped of everything but his pride.

And a savage lust for revenge.

Simply one of the finest novels of the last 20 years.
"Unmatched narrative skill...exciting"

—*Saturday Review*

"A distinguished first novel"—*Library Journal*

FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK

P O P U L A R  L I B R A R Y